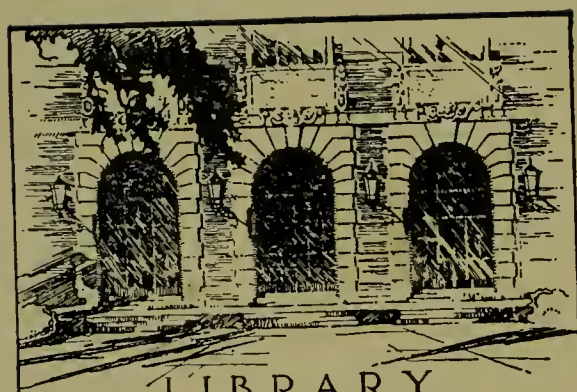

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THE WRONG ROAD

THE WRONG ROAD

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BY

MAJOR ARTHUR GRIFFITHS

AUTHOR OF

'FAST AND LOOSE,' 'LOCKED UP,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

WILLIAM BLACKWOOD AND SONS

EDINBURGH AND LONDON

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THE WRONG ROAD.

CHAPTER XLVII.

AN OLD POACHER.

THE news of Podifat's return to Straddlethorpe, and the easy terms on which he lived there, soon spread and was freely commented on by the county. Some saw in it a fresh proof of Sir Hubert's low tastes; a few, chief among them General Wyndham-Parker, thought the young baronet was showing up well, and praised his great goodness to the man he need hardly have recognised at all.

"It was not what I advised him," the Gen-

eral frankly confessed. "I saw no reason why he should be burdened with the old rascal, and said so."

"Lezaire may be as kind as he pleases to his old father—ex-father I suppose we ought to call him — but he'd better have done it further away."

"He was ready to pension him, and actually did pay down a handsome sum for him to go, but the old rogue turned up again within a week," General Parker admitted, rather indiscreetly.

"Did he, now? Well, that looks rather fishy, I think. Why should he offer him money to go unless he was afraid of him — ashamed rather?" protested the first speaker. "And with reason."

"Yes, begad! and he'll be more ashamed still, unless the rascal mends his ways. The old poacher's bound to get his young friend into a mess," said a squire whose lands "marched" with Straddlethorpe.

"How's that?" asked the General, a little nervously.

"My keeper tells me he has a strong suspicion this old Podifat has been after my young pheasants. Found some wire traps in my spinney t'other side of Straddlethorpe, which no one but Podifat could have laid."

"He's not particular about boundary-lines. Some one saw him with his gun on Bingley moors, miles from Lezaire land, in broad daylight too."

"I believe it was he who netted my pools," said another squire.

"I'll set the police on him if he comes my way," added a third.

"Don't, please, take any steps until I have spoken to young Lezaire," the General entreated. "I am sure he only has to know what his *protégé* is about to stop it peremptorily."

But Sir Hubert seemed strangely disinclined to interfere with his "old father," as Podifat was generally called about Straddlethorpe.

"I don't believe he has touched a feather or caught a fish off my lands," said the baronet.

"Why should he? He gets sport enough with what I've given him."

"If you were just to hint to him, to suggest a little more caution——"

"I don't believe a word of it all, I tell you."

"But there must be something in it. So many persons were talking of it at the club, and all agreed in suspecting him."

Sir Hubert cursed the club and its long-tongued gossips, and refused point-blank to speak to his "old father."

Complaints were still made, more specific and seemingly unanswerable. The police were obliged to take the matter up; so Mr Earswick, who knew the way to Straddlethorpe, and had been concerned in the first dealings with Podifat, was despatched with a polite message to the Hall.

"I was to say, sir"—the police officer tried to tone down the threat—"that Captain Bracebridge would be truly sorry to act. But if gentlemen continue to complain, there will be nothing for it but to take out a warrant——"

"Against me? I like your cheek."

"Well, sir, you might be charged with harbouring, perhaps, but no worse. I don't suppose you're likely to turn poacher——"

"Thankee; I've half a mind to kick you out of the place."

"No offence, Sir Hubert. Only, upon my word, we shall have to take this Podifat up if he goes on so."

Sir Hubert looked up uneasily.

"What can I do? What do you wish me to do?"

"Speak to the man—warn him—stop his allowance—turn him adrift. A word from you would settle everything."

"I wish I thought so," muttered the baronet between his teeth; but he added aloud, "I'll speak to him—one of these days."

It was not next day, or the day after, but more than a week later, that Sir Hubert summoned courage to attack his troublesome guest. Even then he had fortified himself for the interview by copious glasses of liqueur. The

decanter stood handy by his elbow as he harangued the truculent Podifat fiercely in the dining-room with the table between them.

"Look here, I won't have it," said Sir Hubert, brave enough now, his evil face flushed with drink, his voice thick. "I've stood it long enough. You are bringing disgrace on me, and worse on yourself."

"What am I doing now?" asked his "old father," insolently.

"Poaching. Can't you drop it? Why aren't you satisfied with my coverts and my waters?"

"Your coverts? Your waters? Yah!" There was boundless contempt in the words thus mockingly repeated. "I'll tell you why I ain't satisfied. Cos I ain't got room. Why, where I comes from a man's free to shoot whatever he sees; there ain't no preserves, no game-laws, no police."

"You'd better go back there. I'll help you to that any day."

"Thank ye. I know when I'm well off, and that's here."

"Where you won't stop much longer, I tell you. If I hear any more complaints, out you go, neck and crop."

"Who'd put me out? You?" Podifat put both his hands on the table and stared impudently at Sir Hubert on the other side. "You daren't; you know better. Just say another cross word and I'll go straight to Lady Lezaire. I know where to find her."

If he thought to cow the baronet by this threat, he missed his mark. Sir Hubert was now furious, and his reply defiant.

"Go where you like—to the devil, or further; I'm done with you. Try your worst."

"If I do, you won't stop long here, I give you fair notice."

"Be off! Clear out!" Sir Hubert had gulped down a fresh dose of benedictine. "I'll have you put out," and he tore violently at the bell-handle behind him. "Here!" he cried to the butler, who was strangely close at hand, and Gibbings, who followed, "put this fellow out. I've had enough of him. He's got to go straight

out of Straddlethorpe. He shan't stay on my land or under roof of mine. You see to it, Gibbings. Hustle him, kick him, bundle him out."

"You'll be sorry for this," shouted Podifat, as he struggled with the two servants who were dragging him to the door. "I shall go to my lady and tell her all about you, you miserable, murderous young cur!"

"Come," said Gibbings shortly, as they deposited Mr Podifat outside the hall door, "we've had enough of your jaw. You've got notice to quit. I'll call round at your quarters before sundown and see the last of you."

"You'd better not come alone, though I'm man enough for half-a-dozen like you. My Purdey shoots straight, and I'll fill the first man's stomach with small-shot that comes within range of North Lodge."

With that he pulled himself together, and muttering threats and oaths, strode down the avenue.

Gibbings was resolved, in spite of what

Podifat had said, to pay him a visit. It was his duty, in the first place, to carry out Sir Hubert's wishes; and in the second, the few words let drop by the old poacher when expelled from the Hall had made him anxious to hear more. But brave men may be prudent, and Gibbings was wise enough to wait till next morning, and to approach North Lodge with considerable circumspection.

The house, a semi-Gothic structure, having its principal rooms on the ground-floor and only garrets under the eaves, stood on the edge of the Bingley wood in a little clearing facing the highroad. A wicket-gate gave admission through the high fence of the park.

From under cover of this fence Gibbings carefully reconnoitred the premises before he essayed to enter. Sounds as of some one moving about the house fell upon his ear, quickened by the sense of coming danger. Then as he peered through a chink between the palings, he saw the front door open and a figure issue forth.

"A sortie from the garrison," he muttered.

"Can he have seen me coming? How about the Purdey! Holloa! why——"

He suddenly straightened himself up and boldly walked towards the wicket-gate, through which he passed, and crossing the neglected garden-patch, cried aloud—

"Mr Earswick! You're not the man I thought to see here. What's up?"

"Nor I you. What brings you? Is this Podifat a friend of yours?" asked the police officer, suspiciously.

"Not much. I'm here because my master sent me. Sir Hubert gave the old scoundrel notice to quit yesterday, and I came to send him to the right-about."

"He's gone, and well for him, or I'd have had him safe enough this time in Market Reepham jail."

"Ah?" asked Gibbings, interrogatively. "Were you going to take him away?"

"I should have asked for a warrant this very day. There's evidence enough here to get him a fresh lagging. Come along and see."

Podifat appeared to have occupied only one room of the long unused and greatly dilapidated lodge. This was the kitchen, or keeper's living-room, the appearance of which spoke volumes as to the character and ways of its late occupant.

In one corner lay a pile of newly cut fir-boughs, the primitive bed-place of the old savage; the hearthstone was covered with wood embers—Podifat had evidently disdained to use the kitchener; all around lay the litter and filth of weeks—scraps of food, garbage, and refuse of all kinds; empty bottles in dozens, whisky-jars, a battered kettle, a dirty frying-pan inch-deep in grease.

"See here!" said Earswick, kicking over with his foot a great bundle of rags and sacking.

"Look at that hamper, and the label: Castro, the poulterer of Market Reepham. This is where he gets his game. And look at those pheasants' feathers. The shooting don't begin for another three weeks; he's been trapping

them, and killing salmon too, in the close time."

"Has he cleared out, do you think?" asked Gibbings, a little disappointed at having no further conversation with the baronet's "old father."

"I expect so, but hardly for good. His gun's there still, and a lot of cartridge-cases newly filled."

"He meant them for some of us, I expect. We'd better stop that game," said Gibbings, as he filled his pockets with the cartridges. "You take the gun, mister, and come along. We'll lock up the place, and I'll take the key back to the Hall."

"We may as well walk through the house before we leave it. This is the only room I've been in."

From the kitchen they passed across the little hall to what in its best days had been the parlour—an empty chamber with blackened ceiling, and paper hanging loose on the damp walls.

"He didn't use this room much."

"As I understand, no one has lived in the house for years till just lately. I remember, the Colonel talked of doing it up and putting in another under-keeper."

"We may as well look up-stairs all the same. I've been taught not to do my work by halves."

The garrets were reached by a steep staircase little better than a ladder, which ended on the threshold of the first, a narrow cupboard-like den, ankle-deep in dust, with a door that was locked, leading no doubt to a second room, to which one vigorous kick gave admission. The second garret was as dusty and dirty as the first, and like it, empty, as it seemed.

Gibbings and the police officer gave a short look round, and were on the point of retracing their steps, when the latter said casually—

"What's that over there under the rafters? A box? Lend a hand, will you? Let's have it out," and together they dragged it near the gloomy window.

It was a common deal box painted stone colour, with edges and angles dented and battered, but still stout and strong. On the lid two capital letters had been rudely painted in white by some unskilled hand.

"H. P.," said Gibbings, meditatively. "What does that spell? Half pay?"

"Hubert Podifat, perhaps," suggested Earswick. "There may be something inside to tell us more. The box is locked. Step down, will you, and fetch the chopper from the kitchen. We will force it open."

It was a secure lock, but it yielded soon to force, and the lid was raised.

"Only old clothes," cried Earswick, disappointed, as he rummaged amongst the contents, turning them all out upon the floor. "Stinking rags at best. We'd better have left them alone. This looks a little better, though. Why, what in heaven's name have we here?"

"A greatcoat—an ulster! The Colonel's, by all that's glorious!" cried Gibbings. "I could swear to it amongst a thousand."

"Yellow plaid with red lines. The one that was missing at the trial, eh? How on earth did it come here?"

"Perhaps you think we hid it, Mr Peeler. If so, d'ye think I'd have let you find it here to-day?"

"How could you have stopped me?" asked Earswick, suspiciously.

"I never tried, and I didn't want to. But what's the good of wasting time and talk. You can't try my old master twice, I know the law. And if you could, finding this coat wouldn't help you much. But, please God, it'll do better than that. It'll lead us yet to those who committed the crime."

"I believe you're right, Mr Gibbings. It certainly supplies a fresh clue."

"Which we will follow out together, Mr Earswick, if it suits you: working with and not against each other this time, if you'll be advised by me."

"And what shall we do with the coat meanwhile? We ought to have it."

"So you shall. Take it to your chief at Market Reepham, and tell him where you found it. But let's clear out of this double quick. Podifat or no Podifat, we've done a good morning's work."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

CHANGING PROSPECTS.

The discovery of the Inverness was undoubtedly a new departure. Even Earswick felt this, although with professional caution he pretended still to be sceptical. But Gibbings had no prejudices to overcome; besides, he was positive where the police officer was still open to doubt. Earswick might suspect that Gibbings was concerned in the concealment of the cloak; Gibbings, better informed, was certain he had had no part in it.

Recent events had undoubtedly thrown a new complexion over the Lezaire case. Many new and strange facts had transpired since Gibbings had come to Straddlethorpe. It seemed

his bounden and immediate duty to lay them all before his old master, with whom he had had no communication for some time past.

Beyond a short telegram that he had been detained in Thorpeshire, and which—being, as we are aware, no scholar—he had dictated to a postal clerk, he had as yet given no account of his movements. He intended to do so by word of mouth the first chance he got of slipping up to town. Caution was more than ever necessary now, as well as despatch. So pleading as an excuse a summons to the Army Pension Office, he got a day's leave from Sir Hubert and took the first train to town.

He reached Harrop's Green early in the forenoon, and found the house topsy-turvy, littered and half dismantled, with every indication of another move.

The Colonel was at the ticket-office, but Mrs St Evelyn quickly explained that they were on the point of leaving England, all of them, for a long time, perhaps for good and all. To better themselves? Why, of course—the

Colonel had got an excellent situation; and sitting there amidst the packing-cases, Rachel gleefully told Gibbings all about it.

There had been little change with the St Evelyns since we left them until within the last few weeks, when all at once, as so often happens in life, an entirely new prospect had opened before them quite suddenly and unawares.

It was all through Mr Carrington Lomas, who, since their first meeting, had never ceased to show a friendly interest in them all. He had become almost an old friend, and he proved it by those little attentions the rich can give, and the poor, however proud, accept, without patronage on the one side and loss of self-respect upon the other.

Mrs St Evelyn never wanted now for flowers, the children for fruit, nor St Evelyn himself for the savoury food he still loved as in happier days: a fine salmon, a box of grouse straight from the moors, plump partridges, or a Michaelmas goose, were gifts he still thoroughly appreciated.

"Upon my soul," he said, "I ought to call and thank him. He's monstrous kind, this Mr Lomas."

"Do, dearest, the first day you are off duty. If you only leave a card."

"That would look pretentious in my present position. No, I will try and find him at home. I am genuinely obliged to him, and should like to say so in many words."

The call was made, the visit presently returned. The old gentleman, who, though brusque and sharp-spoken, was clearly a kindly philanthropic soul, pressed the St Evelyns to bring their children for a run in his garden.

"Whenever and as often as you please," he repeated more than once, and they took him at his word.

It was on one of these happy afternoons—most pleasant perhaps to the country-bred Rachel, who in her dingy London home ever pined for the green turf and shady woods of Straddlethorpe—that Mr Lomas took St Eve-

lyn aside, and rather bluntly, but with the heightened colour of a shy man approaching a delicate subject, said—

"Why do you stop on at Harrop's Green, Colonel? The place isn't half good enough for you."

"Beggars must not be choosers, Mr Lomas. It gives us bread, and that's something. Besides, where am I to get anything better? Prejudice is strong against a man like me, after what I've been through."

"Stuff and nonsense! That's rather in your favour. I think you were very hardly used."

"You know the facts? You have followed the case?" asked St Evelyn, brightening at the sympathy shown.

"Certainly. I made it my business some time ago, in fact as soon as I found out—I mean, as soon as I knew exactly who you were. But I have a particular reason in asking you whether you are wedded to the service of the North-Eastern Extension Railway Company and the ticket-office at Harrop's Green."

"Perhaps you mean to offer me something better?" said St Evelyn with a pleasant laugh.

"Well, that's about it. The only point is whether you care to go abroad."

St Evelyn's face fell, and with a gesture of disappointment he pointed to his children tumbling about at their mother's feet on the lawn.

"They could go with you, if that's all. It's not a bad climate—on the contrary, and just the country for the growing family of, pardon me, a poor man."

"I am deeply grateful to you for your kindness, Mr Lomas, and were I alone in the world would unhesitatingly accept your offer at once, in the hearty spirit in which it is made. But you will understand why I wish first to know more."

"You have every right to know—I will tell you in half-a-dozen words. I have some large works in Nova Scotia, mines more exactly, coal-mines, but they are not underground. There is a large output, and we employ a number of hands. It is a long way off, and I am not

satisfied with the returns. A closer supervision, stricter management, exercised by some one accustomed to command and therefore determined to be obeyed, is, I think, indispensable. You are just the sort of man I want. Will you go out as manager for me?"

St Evelyn put out his hand, saying frankly and without hesitation—

"Yes, of course I will go, and as soon as you please."

"Wait, wait; let me tell you something more of the place, of the salary, and so forth. I must indeed," he went on, seeing the Colonel would have interrupted him; "it's only business. Two thousand dollars a-year—that's four hundred pounds,—with house and garden, coals free—they're cheap enough there—and a prospective *pro rata* increase according as you increase the returns. Will that suit you?"

"My dear Mr Lomas, don't say another word. I'm your man, and would be for half the money. Here, Rachel, Rachel! come over and hear the good news."

There were tears of gratitude in the gentle wife's eyes when she heard Mr Lomas's liberal offer, so kindly and thoughtfully made.

"You have been a true friend to us, Mr Lomas—far kinder, indeed, than some nearer and——"

She paused, hesitating to reproach her mother.

"And dearer. Not quite that, Rachel," her husband added for her. "There is not one spark of affection left in Lady Lezaire."

"Hush, Ferdinand, please." Sweet Rachel would not allow another word. "But our gratitude to you is sincere and very deep, Mr Lomas. How shall we repay you?"

"The obligation is on my side. Colonel St Evelyn is just the person I want."

"He is a first-rate man of business really," said the little woman bravely, and with such energy that both the gentlemen laughed, "and he will serve you as honestly and faithfully as your great, great kindness deserves. It is the very least return we can make."

"I promise that upon my honour. I can say

no more," added St Evelyn, with characteristic abruptness. "When would you like me to go out?"

"When would it suit you? I am rather anxious, I must confess, to make the change. I do not wish to press you, of course, but the winter begins early there, and——"

"An old soldier is always in marching order. My heavy baggage is light enough nowadays, even with these *impedimenta*," and he looked laughingly at his wife and the children now clinging to her dress.

"I will secure your passages forthwith—for, say, this day month. And you will, of course, require an advance—of what? Half-a-year's salary—will that do? To be repaid by instalments."

"We could not possibly accept so much," began Rachel, falteringly.

"Why, you have warm clothing to lay in—furs, blankets, all sorts of supplies. It shall be sent you to-morrow—or better, Colonel, you shall draw on me for the amount you require."

That was a happy evening—the happiest they had spent in Harrop's Green since they came to live there,—the happiest almost since the days at Trouville, now so long, long ago.

"I shall not be sorry to leave England for good and all," said St Evelyn, cheerfully.

"Nor I," echoed Rachel, but with less assurance. "We will make a new home for ourselves, a new life out there. There is nothing here to regret, no one——"

Again she hesitated, thinking sadly of her mother, still bitter and estranged, whom probably she would never see again.

"No one—but Gibbings. But he must come out to us. We shall be sure to find him a good place. There are plenty in these new lands, and he is just the man to prosper there."

These were the very words Mrs St Evelyn repeated to the trusty man-servant when she had told him all the story; and the Colonel coming in just then, added his entreaties that Gibbings should join them in Nova Scotia.

"I can be of more use, I take it, at home, as

I think you'll agree with me when I tell you what's turned up at Straddlethorpe."

And he proceeded to recount his recent adventures at the Hall. His news was stranger and even more startling than that of the St Evelyn's; and when he had described all he had seen and heard, ending with the discovery of the Inverness, a very animated discussion followed, to the exclusion of every other topic.

"It was hidden, of course," said the Colonel. "But why there, and by whom?"

"Of course it was done on purpose," said Gibbings. "It's disappearance was part of the plot against you, Colonel."

"Implying that it had been made away with," went on Mrs St Evelyn, bringing a woman's quick wits to bear upon the question. "But that was a later thought, I expect. It was of course abstracted in the first instance to be used as a disguise."

"In personating me, in fact," said the Colonel.

"And it was so used: we have the chemist's evidence for that. No doubt the person who bought the arsenic wore your Inverness, Ferdinand."

"That's as clear as noonday. The next point is to discover the person."

"It was some one at the Hall."

"Or some one at the Hall was in it. How else could the Inverness be abstracted?"

"Hubert Podifat," suggested the Colonel, quickly.

"Wicked wretch! Could he have killed dear Carysfort, for whom he expressed such ardent affection? Oh no—impossible! And for other reasons."

"I should like to hear them," said the Colonel. "Who benefited most by Carysfort's death?"

"That could not have affected Hubert's succession. He would still have succeeded, had Carysfort been alive, directly the papers—papa's papers, I mean—had been found."

"And he had nothing to do with the finding

of them," said Gibbings. "It was the housekeeper, wasn't it—Mrs Leleu?"

"Mrs Leleu!" cried Mrs Evelyn, catching at the words. "An evil woman: I never liked her face. And what is this you say, Gibbings, of the power she seems to wield over Podifat?"

Mrs St Evelyn would never have conceded the name of Lezaire to the present holder of the title.

"It certainly brings Mrs Leleu into the business, but how or why I cannot for the life of me see," said the Colonel, rather bewildered.

"If you did, dearest, the whole mystery would be unravelled; and we mustn't expect that at one stroke."

"What has become of Mrs Leleu?" asked the Colonel.

"She is living at Bulkeley Wells, or was," said Gibbings. "I saw a letter addressed to her there."

"Mamma is going on there this week from Beachborough, where she has spent the summer. Frisby, her maid, wrote me word."

"Perhaps your mother will keep her eye on Mrs Leleu, just to oblige us," said the Colonel, sarcastically. "Not that she has ever done much in that way."

"I was thinking I'd run over to Bulkeley Wells now and again," said Gibbings. "It's no great distance from Straddlethorpe. If my lady's there, old Podifat will perhaps turn up too, and I'd like to know what he's got to say to her."

"Ask Lady Lezaire herself, she'll be sure to tell you," laughed St Evelyn. "If anything, she's as fond of you as she is of me."

CHAPTER XLIX.

BULKELEY WELLS.

Bulkeley Wells is a health-resort on the edge of the Thorpeshire wolds. It lies on the northern bank of the Straddle, a picturesque hamlet lying low in a deep sinuous valley, well sheltered from wintry winds. The climate is unusually mild for England, the air pure and bracing—thanks to the elevation—while the discovery of certain mineral waters of supposed wondrous efficacy have added greatly to the attractions of the place.

In spite of its natural advantages, the village is only a village still, with a single street of stone-built but unpretending cottages with moss-grown roofs, an ancient parish church, and

half-a-dozen shops in the market square. One of these is a confectioner's, which provides "meat" and "sweet" teas for the crowds that come in van-loads from the eastern end of Thorpeshire, and which would drive a roaring trade but for the public-house on the other side of the way.

Local enterprise, anxious to encourage visitors of a better class, backed up by local capital, has endowed Bulkeley Wells with a few houses of a better sort—villas, standing single or semi-detached, with gardens ending on the shady walk which margins the river. But the new hotel is the great attraction at Bulkeley Wells, an imposing, not to say pretentious edifice, standing high upon the hillside, and appropriately styled the Palatial. The house stands in extensive grounds of its own, with lodge gates, a long carriage-drive, shrubberies, plantations, and a broad expanse of ornamental water. The external aspect is that of a country mansion; inside, the gorgeous decoration, the profusion of cheap gilding and showy upholstery,

are rather those of a French restaurant or a foreign casino.

But the outlay had been well expended. The Palatial Hotel is very popular with a large class in Thorpeshire, and beyond it. There is a great run on the house at certain seasons; every bedroom is engaged, every seat at the *table d'hôte* in the grand dining-hall, where the fare is of the most liberal Thorpeshire kind.

The hotel was quite full when Lady Lezaire arrived from Beachborough. It was late in the afternoon, and she had had a long journey. She had not secured rooms in advance, and the manager received her in a very offhand way.

"I'm sorry, but I don't see how I'm to help it, if the house is full. People must write beforehand," he said, brusquely.

Lady Lezaire grew very indignant at this reception in Thorpeshire, within easy reach of Straddlethorpe, where she had once reigned supreme, and turning to her maid, she cried—

"Don't have the baggage brought in, Frisby. We will go somewhere else."

"This is the only hotel at Bulkeley Wells," went on the manager, exulting.

"Very well, my lady," answered the maid, as she ran down the steps to the fly.

The manager had pricked up his ears at the address, and he quickly followed to inquire who "my lady" was. The name of Lezaire was familiar enough to him, and he came back at once, with altered, now obsequious manner.

"I could give your ladyship a room; it is a good room, although rather high, and perhaps change it for a better within the week."

"I shall not stay a week. I intend to take a house; but anything will do for to-night. I shall want a private sitting-room."

"That, my lady, is absolutely impossible. There isn't one vacant, not one. But you will not need it. We have magnificent public rooms, a special boudoir for the ladies, a ball-room, reading-room—ample accommodation."

"I don't choose to herd with the crowd," replied Lady Lezaire, loftily.

"At least you'll join the *table d'hôte* dinner at six, my lady, I hope," said the manager, insinuatingly.

"I think not. I will have tea in my own room."

"I am truly sorry, deeply grieved, indeed, my lady, but that is against the rules of the house. Nothing is served in the bedrooms except in case of illness."

"What a detestable hotel!" said Lady Lezaire. "Where is my room? I suppose I must stay—I can't help myself; but it shall only be for the night."

Lady Lezaire liked the place less than ever when, summoned by a noisy gong an hour or two later, she descended to the dining-room, and after waiting humbly on the good pleasure of the head-waiter, was presently given a seat at a small side-table which accommodated the overflow from the main *table d'hôte.*

The moment she took her place, and before

she had swallowed a mouthful of soup, her neighbours on either side began talking to her. The absence of ceremony was a chief feature of the Palatial Hotel. Acquaintances commenced always at the *table d'hôte*, and generally without introduction. Lady Lezaire did not know this, and she was in no humour to welcome such overtures. For a perfect stranger to address her was an unwarrantable liberty, which she would have at once resented by leaving the table, only she was hungry and wanted her dinner.

So when one neighbour, an oldish gentleman with a strong Thorpeshire accent, suggested pleasantly that she had only just come—a fact she knew much better than he did,—and when her other neighbour, an over-dressed youth with an affected drawl, asked her whether she liked Bulkeley Wells, and meant to make a long stay, she merely put up her eye-glass and stared insolently at each of them, without making any reply.

She took refuge in her eye-glass from further

annoyance, and sitting bolt-upright in her chair, with calm insolence proceeded to survey the strange company in which she found herself.

There must have been at least a hundred people dining. The largest number occupied a great table running down the centre of the room, on each side of which were smaller tables, such as that at which Lady Lezaire was seated, one in each of the four corners of the room. She had an excellent view of every one except those whose backs were to her.

"What a collection!" was her mental comment, as she noted the varieties of female costume, mostly an exaggerated burlesque of recent fashions, and the pretentious airs of the men, whose common looks were enhanced, not improved, by correct evening attire. "Where can they come from? Not Thorpeshire, surely. I never thought the county contained so many extraordinary people."

And not a face she knew! A Thorpeshire watering-place—the Thorpeshire accent running

like a refrain through all the buzzing talk, yet not a soul she had ever met in the Thorpeshire that had been so long her home !

Stay !—that dark, sallow-faced woman, with the coal-black hair and fierce dark eyes. No stranger, surely ? Again and again Lady Lezaire, with the vexed uncertainty of a short-sighted woman, examined through her eye-glass the features that seemed so familiar.

"I ought to know her, and I do, I am sure of it ; but I cannot put a name to her. Who can it be ?"

More and more worried and *intriguée* as positive recognition evaded her, she turned at length to one of the neighbours she had so cruelly snubbed, and tried to make amends.

She chose the younger ; the elder, when first repulsed, had so concentrated his attention upon his plate that he was now purple and past conversation.

"The hotel is very full, apparently," said her ladyship, civilly. "Many nice people here ?"

"Shoals."

"You know them all, I suppose?"

"All the best, certainly," he replied, gratified at the compliment.

"Can you tell me who that lady is near the top of the table on the far side—a dark woman, in black velvet and——"

"Where? There? Oh yes! I know. A very charming person—a great traveller—knows the world, and has moved in the best society."

"Can you tell me her name?"

"Skene, Mrs Marmaduke Skene, from London and New York. That is what is entered in the visitors' book."

"Mrs Skene? Oh!" and Lady Lezaire dropped her eye-glass, having no further interest in the matter. She had never met or known a Mrs Skene, and supposed she had been misled by this woman's resemblance to some one else.

The dinner was interminable. Course succeeded course, and the guests did ample justice to all. Lady Lezaire grew bored and wearied long before it ended, and taking up her

gloves, began her preparations for leaving the table.

"The sweets ain't 'arf done yet. There's a Bakewell pudding to come—better wait for it," muttered the old gentleman in a thick voice.

"You know there's to be music in the drawing-room after dinner," suggested the youth. "I suppose you want to secure a good place and a comfortable arm-chair. There's a great rush amongst the dowagers for the arm-chairs."

No woman likes to be called a dowager, even at eighty; and Lady Lezaire flattered herself she still looked young.

"Sir!" she said angrily, forgetting she had herself encouraged him to talk to her, "you are very impertinent. I am not going to the drawing-room, but to my own room. I prefer my own company to that of people I don't know."

So saying, she rose and left the room.

An hour later her maid found her yawning over a book, and utterly bored with life. The prospect before her was dreary enough: she was quite alone in the world, with compara-

tively straitened means, after enjoying every luxury; she had no longer a home, no hearth, no family, no children of her own; the boy she had doted on dead, murdered, as was still her firm and unalterable conviction; her remaining child estranged from her, having thrown in her lot for ever with a double-dyed villain whom it was impossible to forgive.

"Frisby, you needn't unpack much," said Lady Lezaire; "I certainly shan't stay here, probably not over to-morrow. I think I shall leave England—go away south to the Riviera. I have friends at Cannes. Besides, one is more likely to meet gentlefolk out there than in these second-rate hotels at home."

"They ain't much, my lady, in this house," replied Frisby, with conviction.

"Have you seen any one you know?"

"Well, my lady, I have—the last person I'd have expected. Perked up and dressed up to the nines, holding her head high, and sitting at the best table the same as your ladyship! I never knew such impudence."

"Why, Frisby, you are getting quite warm. Who can it be?"

"That Mrs Leleu, my lady, who was housekeeper at the Hall under your ladyship. Don't you remember her?"

"Of course; now I understand."

The puzzle of the familiar face seen at the dining-table was now solved. The woman she had recognised was no other than her old housekeeper, Mrs Leleu.

"You are quite positive of this, Frisby. Have you spoken to her? Did she answer to her name?"

"Name indeed! she's dropped that. It's well, perhaps, she should. I seed her walking out with the rest of the fine folk from the dining-room, and I knew her directly; but I asked one of the waiters, just to make sure, if he could tell me what she called herself. 'Mrs Skene,' says he, 'Mrs Marmaduke Skene.' That's not the right name, as you know, my lady; but I suppose she didn't want to be remembered as Mrs Leleu. It's her, right enough. Is it likely

I'd forget her, and we living together for three years at the Hall?"

No doubt remained in Lady Lezaire's mind that Mrs Leleu and Mrs Marmaduke Skene were one and the same person. The wish to conceal her identity and former line of life was sufficient explanation of the change of name.

"Have you spoken to her, Frisby? Do you think she saw you?"

"'Tisn't likely, my lady; I'd rather have nothing to say to her now."

"Better not, Frisby. The woman is in a false position, although that's no business of ours. I don't suppose she will claim acquaintance with you, and in any case, I shall leave the hotel to-morrow."

CHAPTER L.

MANY MEETINGS.

Lady Lezaire next morning refused positively to go down to the public breakfast, and pleading illness, was allowed to have what she wanted in her room. When she had finished it, and was so far dressed as to be independent of her maid's assistance, she despatched Frisby into the village to see whether any decent lodgings were to be procured. Having come to Bulkeley Wells, she wished to stay there, at least a few weeks, or until the winter season had begun upon the Riviera.

While she leisurely completed her toilet, the chambermaid came and told her that some one was asking for her down-stairs.

"Who is it? I expected no one. What name?"

It was a man looking something like a keeper or a coachman, the chambermaid answered. That was all she knew, except that he said he had come from Straddlethorpe, and that he was most anxious to see Lady Lezaire.

A woman's curiosity soon overcame any first hesitation in Lady Lezaire. She had had no direct communications with the Hall for many months, although old friends in the county sometimes corresponded with her. But their letters contained only general gossip; and while commenting upon Sir Hubert's behaviour, gave no very precise details of what went on at Straddlethorpe.

Here was a chance of learning more exactly all that had happened since her exodus. This man was probably a servant out of place, some one she had known, who had followed her seeking a new character or her good word.

"If he chooses to wait for half an hour or so, I will see him. I shall not be down before that."

When Lady Lezaire left her room she was equipped in bonnet and cloak, meaning, if Frisby had returned, to go with the maid and see the lodgings. On descending to the hall she found the manager very solicitous about her health.

"Some one has been asking for me," she began, cutting short all inquiries.

"Yes, my lady. He was outside a minute or two ago, and no doubt is still waiting there." The manager opened the hall door, bowing low, and then accompanied Lady Lezaire to the bottom of the entrance-stairs.

No man was visible.

"Oh, well, if he didn't choose to wait, that's his affair," said Lady Lezaire. "You can tell my maid when she returns that she will find me somewhere in the grounds. They seem nicely laid out," she added graciously.

"Oh, my lady, you are too good! But we take immense pains. I hope you will inspect them thoroughly. I should like to accompany you, but just at this moment——"

"Thank you, don't apologise. I shall find my way, no doubt." And she sauntered slowly across a piece of level lawn that stretched almost uninterruptedly from the front of the house towards a fringe of shrubbery that ended the grounds.

On her way she passed a summer-house nestling among the yellowing leafage, placed so as to command the best view of the beautiful valley.

There were people in the summer-house. She heard voices raised high in altercation, and was passing quickly on, having no desire to intrude upon the quarrels of others, when she was pulled up short by hearing her own name.

"Lady Lezaire, you fool! There's no Lady Lezaire here." It was Mrs Leleu's voice.

"You're a liar!" A coarse oath strengthened the rude rejoinder. "I tracked her here from Beachborough, tracked her to the station last night, and saw the flyman that drove her to this hotel."

"Well, let's say she is here. What is it you want with her?"

"I've got something to tell her, some information she will be glad enough to buy."

"Not about——you wouldn't be such a blind, blundering fool. It would ruin everything—spoil the whole game."

"I'll do it, I swear I will, unless I'm allowed to cut in."

"You shall have your share. Who wants to prevent you?"

"He does. Thinks he can keep it all to himself—so do you. But you shan't."

"You'd have blown the whole gaff if you'd stayed on at Straddlethorpe playing the old games. Why couldn't you drop it and live decently? Look at me."

"It's ten years since I fingered a trigger or brought down a bird. The free air out on the moors made me mad. You forget I was brought up in the woods where I could kill all I could come up with. Here they cop yer for carrying a gun. Over yonder now——"

"Why don't you go back there? It would suit you far better. You could live like a gentleman, and shoot what you chose."

"Ay; wild geese and cariboo, elk and birch partridges; and fish the lake-runs for salmon-trout; and go moose-calling on winter's nights with Joe MicMac or Caughnawaga Bill."

"Well, why not? Will you go?"

"How much?" answered the other after a lengthened pause, during which Lady Lezaire heard every pulsation of her wildly beating heart; "I must know that first. I might perhaps make better terms with my lady."

"You'll drop that line altogether if you're wise. It'll be far better for you and for her."

The menace conveyed by the last few words made the listener's blood run cold.

"I'm not afraid of you, my dearie; you daren't do me no harm. As for m' lady, when I've done with her, she may look out for herself."

"She'd better not play into your hands or come across my path."

Lady Lezaire, thoroughly terrified, turned to

leave the spot. What would happen to her, what would this terrible woman do to her, if she was caught outside the summer-house? But it was all so strange, so deeply interesting. She must hear more, if only a dozen words more: there were perhaps still stranger things to come.

"Oh, there ain't much tender-heartedness about you, my dearie! You know what you wants, and you manage to get it, spite of all obstacles in the way." The man laughed in cynical admiration.

"I swore to do it some day," she replied, darkly.

"I know that; but I never thought you would or could. That's what beats me—how did you work it?"

"That's my affair. You leave it alone."

"All so pat, too—so perfect and complete. I was nonplussed, hocussed, you might have said—I was so took aback when I got home to the Hall and found young Hubert there in the old man's place."

"Look here, Jacob, I've told you to leave all

that alone. 'Tain't no business of yours, except to pick up what's coming to you, and it's a fair share if only you take it the right way. When will you leave England?"

"By the end of the week, if you make it worth my while."

"You haven't said how much yet."

"I want a hundred down, and three hundred a-year."

"It's a bargain, then. I'll write to Hubert and settle it all. But you must clear out of here at once. Go down to Liverpool and stay there till you sail."

"All right, my sweetie. You give us the dollars, or some of them."

"You shall have twenty pounds down, only I must first go back to the hotel. But make yourself scarce now. I can't be seen talking to you, and we have been together long enough in here. I'll meet you in half an hour at the confectioner's: you can't miss it, just opposite the public-house in the market square. Now go: you first, I'll follow."

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When old Podifat, whom the reader will have recognised, left the summer-house, Lady Lezaire had already disappeared. She had some time previously interpreted Mrs Leleu's words as implying that the interview was all but ended, and a real sense of impending danger had forced her to fly.

She breathed more freely when once more within the privacy of her own bedroom. Although still dazed and bewildered, she could think a little more calmly over all she had heard. They were very strange and very startling, these new facts sprung upon her so suddenly, so unexpectedly, losing nothing from their incompleteness and the vague mystery that surrounded them.

Who was this man who had come to see her, Lady Lezaire, but whom Mrs Leleu had kept away? Who, after all, was Mrs Leleu, and what was the meaning of her intimate, perhaps culpable, acquaintance with her visitor?

While still pondering, doubtful, and perturbed,

Frisby returned, seemingly full of importance, as from a mission successfully discharged.

"Have you found suitable rooms?" asked Lady Lezaire. "I should like to move this very afternoon."

"They ain't much, my lady—not at all much—but they might serve. But it isn't only that. Have you seen any one from Straddlethorpe?"

"No," faltered Lady Lezaire. "Have you?"

"He said he wanted to speak to your ladyship, and that he was coming here a-purpose. But I said as how I was sure you'd never see him."

"Of course I shall not see him. How dare he intrude! Who is he? What does he want?"

There was evident vacillation in the last remark. Lady Lezaire thought her maid was speaking of the man who had been with Mrs Leleu, and hoped much from the answer towards unravelling the riddle.

"He's at the Hall again—in service. You'd

never have believed it, my lady. The last man to be taken on."

"Who is it, woman? Will you speak plain?"

"Mr Gibbings, as was the Colonel's own man. He's here at the Wells. I met him in the market square getting out of one of the breaks from Market Reepham."

"And he wants to see me?"

"Most particular, my lady, and as soon as convenient; that was the message he sent with his duty. I told him he was wasting his breath."

"Was that all? Did he give you no idea of what it was all about, or say why he was so pressing?"

"Well, my lady, he was mysterious-like, but he made so bold as to 'int it 'd be the worse for you if you didn't see him; said you'd be sorry for it some day."

"Where is the man? Here in the hotel?"

"No, my lady, he is waiting for his answer by the post-office. I said I'd go back in half an hour. He wouldn't come near the 'otel:

said there was some one here he'd rather not see, or rather, who didn't wish to see him."

"Mrs Leleu?" hazarded Lady Lezaire.

"It must have been her he was driving at," replied the lady's-maid, gladly seizing the suggestion; "but he needn't have troubled himself. She's that hoity-toity and stuck up she wouldn't know him. She wouldn't know me when we met on the stairs half a minute ago."

"You are sure you made no mistake?"

"Mistake, my lady! Is it likely, after living three years in the same place? She was going to pass me by, but I ups and says to her, 'Lor' a mussy, you have become fine!' 'I don't know you,' says she. 'You orter,' says I, 'seeing as how we were fellow-servants at Straddlethorpe Hall.' 'Meaning me?' says she. 'Then you're altogether in error, for I never was in that Hall, or any other Hall, and that's all about it.' But it was Mrs Leleu fast enough, and I called out her right name after her, and asked her, 'Where's Mrs Marmaduke Skene, Mrs

Leleu?' She was downright mad, my lady, I can tell you."

"Well, well, that's enough of Mrs Leleu. About Gibbings now? He had better come to the new lodgings later in the day. I suppose we can move in at once."

"If it please you, my lady."

"Give me the address, then, and I will walk down to the house. You can pay the hotel bill and follow by-and-by with the baggage."

"But Gibbings, my lady, he will be waiting."

"I will take the post-office on my way, and speak to him as I pass."

CHAPTER LI.

FRESH SCENT.

The Bulkeley Wells post-office, like the shops and the public-house, was in the market square. Indeed one of the windows of the Bulkeley Arms taproom commanded a view of the little stone forecourt in front of the post-office door, as well as the road that sloped down from the Palatial Hotel to the market square.

When Lady Lezaire came down the road she was under full observation from the Bulkeley Arms; and Gibbings, who was watching and waiting for the lady's-maid's answer, saw and recognised the mistress directly she hove in sight.

"Whew!" he whistled. "It is my lady her-

self. Is this a mere accident, or is she coming on purpose to meet me?"

Gibbings still waited, wondering more and more, as Lady Lezaire walked straight up to the little iron gate of the post-office forecourt. There she halted, as if irresolute, and looked nervously around.

"By George! it's me she's after, or I'm a Dutchman. I'll go out to her."

By the time Gibbings had paid his reckoning and crossed the pavement, Lady Lezaire had entered the forecourt. He just caught a glimpse of a dress disappearing through the inner door of the post-office.

"I'd better go after her. I can buy a postage-stamp, or ask what time the post goes out. Anything will do, and on the slightest encouragement I can make up to her."

Gibbings had been too intent on watching Lady Lezaire to notice a second female figure, which had followed her ladyship down the hill. He had disappeared inside the post-

office when this second figure came within nearer view.

It was Mrs Leleu, otherwise Mrs Marmaduke Skene, and she was on her way to the confectioner's, where old Podifat, very much out of his element, was gorging himself with new buns.

Mrs Leleu, seating herself at the same small marble-topped table, and calling for a cup of tea, said at once in a low voice to Podifat—

"You were right about Lady Lezaire: she is here. I have just followed her down the hill."

"Right! Of course I was. What call was there for me to tell lies? I knowed she was here, because I wanted to know it: it was part of my game."

"But you're to throw up your hand now, remember. Here are the twenty pounds; the balance shall be sent to you at Liverpool. I promise that for Hubert, and the yearly sum paid over as you prefer, as soon as you write from the other side. But that's all you'll get, understand."

"My lady, perhaps, 'll be more liberal."

"She can't afford it. We've got the whip-hand of her there now, so you'd better accept our terms and leave her alone. But, as I'm alive, here she is, making straight for this shop, and not alone either."

"Is that Lady Lezaire? Blest if I'd a' known her again! But ten years do make a difference in an old woman's looks. I'd hardly have known you either, my dear, if you hadn't spoke to me first."

"Dry up, Jacob, this is no time for magging. Suppose she comes straight in here and finds us together."

"What odds? Can't we sit in a sweet-shop without asking her leave?"

"You fool! She's bound to recognise you."

"What do I care! She ain't one of the police, and I ain't bound to report myself to her."

"Don't you see what I mean? She will recognise me too, and as I came to the Hall

long after you left, will wonder how we know each other: this may arouse suspicions."

"Then make tracks through the back-door. I shall hold my ground. I know that chap as is walking with her; I met him up at the Hall."

"Why, that's Gibbings," said Mrs Leleu, looking at him more closely. "When could you have met him at the Hall? He left it a year ago with his old master."

"He's come back again, then, with the new."

"Back! How? What brought him? Never mind, you can tell me all that by-and-by. They are coming straight in here."

Mrs Leleu rose hurriedly from her seat and stepped back a few paces towards the counter, hoping she might not be seen, unless, indeed, it was possible for her to escape altogether.

But the danger passed almost as quickly as it had arisen. Lady Lezaire and her companion did not enter the shop, but walked on.

"So Gibbings is back at the Hall," said Mrs

Leleu, resuming her seat and the thread of their conversation.

"That's so. I found him there. He's coachman or head-groom to Hubie, and gallus good friends too."

"It looks queer, and I don't like it. Gibbings belonged always to the other side, and if he's in with Hubert, there's some reason for it, you bet. Only I'd like to know, and what brings him here with Lady Lezaire?"

"Perhaps you'd like me to ask him — only him and I are not exactly friends. I was near putting a charge of buckshot into his mean carcass the last time I saw him."

"When was that? At the Hall?"

"Just there; when I had that last flare-up with Hubie he called for this chap to put me out."

"What! is he so thick with Hubert?"

"Thick? Thick as thieves. Always riding about together, or else Hubie's in the harness-room with him smoking, or some other game."

"And Hubert called him in to put you out,

you say. D'ye guess this Gibbings heard anything that passed between you?"

"He might have; I can't swear. I was downright mad, and was talking pretty tall."

"Do you recollect at all what you were saying?"

Podifat shook his head.

"Mostly cursing, I expect, and threatening."

"To tell Lady Lezaire," said Mrs Leleu, putting her hand on his arm; "was that it?"

"Like enough. How could you guess that?"

"Don't you see, you oaf? This Gibbings has come over to put my lady on her guard. That's what he's telling her now, you may be sure. How else could he get speech of her? She couldn't bear him—hated him worse than the Colonel; and now here they are as smooth and pleasant as you please. I don't like it."

"What can she do to yer? What are yer afraid of?"

Mrs Leleu did not reply; she was lost in thought. But presently she got up from her seat, saying—

"It all depends on how much Gibbings knows, and what. Hubert may have let something out in drink — young sot! I always warned him against that; and if Gibbings is always with him, a chance word may have set him thinking. He's no fool, Gibbings."

"What do you mean to do, sis? Come along with me across the pond."

"Not yet, Jacob; I must see first what they're after. It may be a false alarm. I'll keep my eye on her ladyship, if I can do so unobserved; it won't be easy, as by this time she knows I'm here. Anyway, you get out. Go straight down to Liverpool, and send me a line from there."

Let us now follow Gibbings, who had found no difficulty in addressing Lady Lezaire. She indeed received him with a cordiality that surprised him.

He began by briefly recounting all he had seen and heard at the Hall, explaining why he had taken service there, and concluding with the strange discovery of the Inverness.

"You know, my lady, the truth's got to come out yet," he said stoutly. "No one's been near it so far, the law least of all. I want to put the Colonel right, for I'm fond of my old master, and luck's been rough on him. Now you, my lady, in spite of the verdict, think it was he as did it."

"No, no," interrupted Lady Lezaire, hastily; "you must not say that."

Her belief was greatly shaken by what she had overheard that morning.

"Perhaps you think it was me?" went on Gibbings, smiling grimly.

"I don't know what I thought, but now I'm certain there has been some terrible misunderstanding. There have been many victims—my poor dear boy, myself, the Colonel too — but why or wherefore, I cannot understand. I am too puzzled, too much bewildered, by what I have heard to-day."

"Might I make so bold as to ask your ladyship what that was, and who you heard it from?"

"I heard it by accident, from a man who came over from Straddlethorpe on purpose to see me."

"By accident," said Gibbings, rather puzzled. "The man was old Podifat, I suppose."

"Old Podifat? The man who once passed as Hubert's father, and who was, I think, sent to jail? Of course, it must have been he."

"And what did he tell you, my lady?"

"I did not see him myself, but I—I—I overheard him talking to a woman who was once in my service, but who is now staying here."

"Mrs Leleu," added Gibbings, promptly. "Of course she's in the plot. Somehow I suspect that she was the prime mover, or had a large hand in it."

"I never suspected her till this morning, I must confess; but now I think very differently."

"What does your ladyship know about this Mrs Leleu?"

"Not very much, but we ought soon to find out more."

"She was in your ladyship's service at the

Hall for many years, I think. Where did she come from? You had a character with her, I suppose. We ought to be able to trace her through that."

"She came to me strongly recommended. I remember that perfectly, and it is possible I may have kept her character, but I am not sure, seeing how long it is ago, and the changes that have occurred since then. Perhaps Mr Tinson can help me."

"Did they recommend her?" asked Gibbings, not sorry to have a sly slap at the lawyers.

"Oh no; but they have a quantity of papers and letters of mine which I sent them on leaving the Hall. I will write to Mr Tinson, or, better still, go to London at once. This ought to be followed up without delay."

"That's right, my lady. No one can do that better than yourself. If you will undertake the job, I will return to Straddlethorpe. But some one ought to keep an eye on Mrs Leleu."

"I'll arrange all that with Mr Tinson."

"But if your ladyship is going to London, there's some one else besides Mr Tinson I hope you'll see."

Gibbings spoke out boldly, knowing how Mrs St Evelyn grieved at the estrangement of her mother.

"Whom do you mean?" asked Lady Lezaire, stiffly but not angrily. She was perfectly well aware, but did not resent the presumption as she would have done a few hours before.

"It's your last chance of seeing them all, my lady," replied Gibbings, feeling certain he was understood.

"Why, what has happened? Where are they going?"

"Out of England, on foreign service—I mean to one of the colonies; and there's no saying when they'll come home—unless——"

"I had not heard a word of this. Where are they living? Tell me more directly."

Gibbings soon satisfied Lady Lezaire, and in a few words informed her of the impending

change in the St Evelyns' prospects and future life.

"Perhaps they will not care to receive me," said Lady Lezaire doubtfully, pleading any excuse.

"The mistress—I mean Mrs St Evelyn, of course, for she'll always be mistress to me—is pining to see your ladyship, I know that—now more than ever; and the wide seas will so soon divide you. And there's the children, my lady—three beauties, round, and sound, and cheery: it 'd do your heart good to see them too."

"You seem very much attached to the family. Your devotion, it seems, was not for the Colonel alone."

"I'm getting an old man, my lady, and a lone man, and the Colonel's family, himself, and the mistress, and the little chicks, are much the same as my own, and all the family, I take it, I shall ever have."

His words went home to Lady Lezaire. Was

not she lonely too and growing old, and might she not take to her heart these her own flesh and blood if she chose?

"I will call at Harrop's Green as soon as I possibly can," she said, quite humbly. She had learnt a lesson from this faithful servant.

CHAPTER LII.

CELERITY AND DISCRETION.

As they talked together, Lady Lezaire and Gibbings had gradually climbed the hilly path towards the hotel. But as they reached the lodge gates the latter said—

"I can't go in, my lady. I don't want to meet that woman face to face."

"I don't see why you should. And really I need not keep you. It will be better for you to go back at once to Market Reepham. Go to the police office and tell them all you have told me. They will send some one then to watch Mrs Leleu."

"That's right, my lady. She ought to be watched, and they'll be the people to do it.

And I think I'll stay on at the Hall; there's no knowing what else may turn up."

"Perhaps they won't let you. But if you leave it, let me know your address. Write to me at Mr Tinson's; they will always know where I am. Good day now. But stay"—she put her hand in her pocket and produced her purse—"you have given much time and trouble to this matter; I hope you will accept——"

"No, no, my lady, don't think of that. I've been only doing my duty, or what's as good nowadays, and I don't want to be paid for that. I shall be more than paid by-and-by, I hope, when I see my old master righted; and that will come, I'll bet anything, even to my shirt. Good day, my lady."

Gibbings touched his hat civilly and returned to the village.

When Lady Lezaire re-entered the hotel, she found Frisby waiting for her in the hall with her bonnet on, encumbered with wraps and

umbrellas, and having the usual appearance of a lady's-maid on her travels.

"I've paid the bill, my lady; the baggage is all down, and is being put on the fly, which will be round directly."

"Tell me, Frisby," said Lady Lezaire, interrupting her—"did you definitely take the rooms?"

"Oh no, my lady; it was only subject to your liking them."

"Well, then, I shall not want them. I am obliged to go to London by the first good train. Perhaps you can tell me"—she turned to the manager, who stood at the door of his office—"what trains there are to London."

"One of the best in the day is the 12.45, my lady, which gets into London soon after four. Sorry to think you are leaving us."

"I am called away suddenly," replied Lady Lezaire, briefly. "You can send on letters to Lincoln's Inn Fields."

"I trust, my lady, that another time we shall be better able to please you. If only

you would be so good as to give us a little notice, the very best rooms in the house would be reserved. You will, I hope, understand——"

The appearance of the fly cut short the manager's apologies; and Lady Lezaire, taking her seat, bade Frisby tell the flyman to take the lodgings on the way to the station. There was not much time to spare, but Lady Lezaire caught the 12.45 express as she wished.

Just about the time the train was running out of Bulkeley Wells station, Mrs Leleu returned to the Palatial Hotel. She was on very friendly terms with the manager, and seeing him seated at his office desk, just inside the hall, did not hesitate to look in for a moment and exchange a few words.

She soon brought the conversation to the hotel, and the business it was doing.

"More arrivals last night, Mr Laslett. I wonder where you could put them all, and no departures."

"Oh, pardon me, Mrs Skene; a lady left this morning whom I should gladly have kept for the season. But we were too crowded for her. A lady of title."

"Indeed?" asked Mrs Leleu, suddenly interested. "Some great personage? Does she belong to the county?"

"Well, she did. You must have heard of her or the family. There has been great talk of the Lezaires of Straddlethorpe."

"Has Lady Lezaire left, then? I heard she had arrived last night. Was she dissatisfied with the hotel? She must have been hard to please."

"She said she was unexpectedly called away —summoned to London. That may or may not have been the reason. All I know is that she has gone up by the 12.45 express."

"To London," said Mrs Leleu to herself, as she walked away to her own room; and suddenly—"Why, it must be on account of something she's heard, from Gibbings, of course, this very morning. She has given me the slip,

but not altogether. I will have her followed from the station, and for the next few days. That may give me some idea of her game.

"But who's to do it? Whom could I trust? No one in London I know. But that's so much the better. Mrs Skene may have reasons, which she need not explain, for doing what Mrs Leleu wouldn't dare. If I only had the address of some inquiry office. Where shall I get it?

"I suppose Mr Laslett has a London directory: but I'd rather not ask him, it might be remembered. They advertise sometimes, these people; I've seen it in the papers. We get them all here, and I'll just run my eye through the 'Times' and the rest."

A very short search rewarded her efforts. There, in a prominent place on the outer sheet, were the names and addresses of several of those peculiar firms and institutions, which are such a strange evidence of the secret intrigues constantly in progress in modern society.

"HAGGIE & HORRY, VINCENT SQUARE. Celerity and Discretion. Missing Friends traced. Persons watched for Divorces, &c. Apply, write, wire, or telephone."

"That'll do for me. Let's see, it's nearly one o'clock. The 12.45 is due"—she consulted a time-table—"is due at 4.30. I will wire to this people, but not from Bulkeley Wells. Jacob has not left yet. He shall drive to Ditchingham, and hand in the message there."

Then, seating herself at a writing-table, she indited the following—

"Haggie and Horry, Vincent Square, London. Watch lady arriving with her maid by 4.30 mail Euston. Lady tall, black costume; maid also in black, stout, red hair. Report movements to-day, and day by day till further instructions. Will receive cheque for expenses by first post to-morrow, and full address."

This telegram was duly despatched by Podifat, upon whom its vital importance was strongly impressed; and Mrs Leleu patiently waited the result.

Let us now follow Lady Lezaire to London. On arrival she drove to a private hotel near Piccadilly. The town house of the Lezaires in Connaught Place was no longer available, even if she had cared to be under obligations to Sir Hubert Lezaire. Since the change in ownership, the London house had been let on a long lease.

It was too late that evening to go to Lincoln's Inn Fields; besides, Lady Lezaire was tired. It had been a long and exciting day, full of varying emotions, and ending with a fatiguing journey to town.

Next morning, having prepared Mr Tinson for her visit by a letter sent overnight, she drove in a hired brougham, provided by the hotel, with the conventional grey horse and the usual commonplace coachman, to the lawyer's office, and was at once shown into his private room.

"Lady Lezaire in London in October! You are the last person I expected to see."

"Strange things have happened, Mr Tinson,

or rather I have come upon some curious information, and want more."

Then she proceeded to detail all she had heard and seen within the last twenty-four hours.

"If there had been nothing more than the gossip of this Gibbings," began Mr Tinson with professional caution, "I shouldn't think much of it all."

"But there is the story of the Inverness."

"That is only doubtful evidence still. Any one might have put it there—Gibbings himself, now he's back at the Hall. He has had full run of the place, remember."

"But it is not only what Gibbings says. I heard enough with my own ears."

"Perfectly. That's what I was coming to. There's enough to start a very ingenious story. But we lawyers are seldom imaginative, we like to work with solid facts. Now, so far, how much do we know?"

He briefly recapitulated the case as it then stood.

"A man of indifferent character, an old convict, in fact, comes to see you, but is intercepted by a woman who seems intimately acquainted with him.

"He was at Straddlethorpe once, but years ago, long before this woman was there. Hence their acquaintance must be antecedent to her residence at Straddlethorpe. Why has he come to see you? Not so much to oblige you as to intimidate some one else. Who is this other person?

"Sir Hubert Lezaire. The man has quarrelled with Sir Hubert, and threatens to reveal something to you—we don't know exactly what—but is prevented by this woman, who buys his silence on Sir Hubert's behalf. Clearly she also knows what was to be revealed, and the value of the secret.

"What is it? There is something between the three: but what? How are we to arrive at it? Let us take up each of the three individuals in turn, and see whether they will help us.

"Sir Hubert we know all about now. His whole life was accounted for at the time of the ejectment suit. Then Podifat, the old man, is known to us at least for the last dozen years. He was gamekeeper at the Hall, and was sent to penal servitude for ten years in 1872, a sentence which has barely expired. He was safely out of the way when all these changes occurred at Straddlethorpe, and whatever secret he possesses must refer to something that happened long ago, although it may have a direct bearing on what has since occurred.

"Now as to the third person, Mrs Leleu. Who and what was she? She was resident at the Hall before and during the changes. Had she any hand in them? What part could she play?"

"Surely you don't suspect her of——"

"I am dealing with facts, Lady Lezaire, not suspicions. But it is a fact, I think, that Mrs Leleu was an inmate of the Hall at the time of your son's death, free to come and go as she pleased, with access to poor Carysfort's bed-

room. She was alone nursing him, if I remember right, during his last illness."

"I had never thought of her," said Lady Lezaire, much agitated. "But why? What possible reason could she have——"

"We must not let imagination run away with us. Let us stick to facts: those we have may bring us to others. Now, what exactly do you know of Mrs Leleu? You engaged her: how? Where did she come from? Some other lady's house, I presume, with a character."

"It is to settle that that I have come here this morning, Mr Tinson. I can't remember exactly how I engaged her; but I made a memorandum at the time, I am sure, and it is amongst my papers—those I sent you when I left the Hall."

"Yes, we have your box. Shall I get it in for you?"

After half an hour's search Lady Lezaire said—

"This is the only record I can find. In my

diary for 1875 I see,—'The new housekeeper has come; a very excellent character.'"

"And that is all? You don't say who gave the character, or whether it was a personal one. I thought you ladies preferred the latter."

"As a rule, yes. But I remember now. This Mrs Leleu came herself to the Hall, hearing I wanted a housekeeper, bringing her characters with her. They were from London, and I did not feel equal to going up on purpose about them. There were two or three, two certainly, both excellent and from ladies of position."

"Did you verify them, or write to the ladies?"

"I hardly think so. I was out of spirits, ill. It was only a year after I had lost Sir Percy. The household affairs were too much for me. I wanted an active, intelligent woman, and this Mrs Leleu seemed so likely to suit me that I took her on trial, I remember now, and was glad to keep her after the first month."

"You don't even remember the names of those ladies of position, or where they lived?"

"One I know was a Mrs Morley Tufnell; the other, I think, Lady Caroline Spatcher."

"I should suggest you seeing them both, or I will write to them, if they are to be found. That is the first business. You had better leave it to me."

Mr Tinson took up a speaking-tube by the side of his desk communicating with a confidential clerk. Only portions of his instructions were audible or intelligible as the tube went alternately from his mouth to his ear.

"Tufnell—do you hear? and Lady Caroline——

"Yes, Spatcher. Quite so—only look——

"Try the directories first, or telephone to Lord Truro's agency."

The confidential clerk presently came in in person. A heavily built, high-shouldered man, with a ponderous manner and hesitating speech, that were nevertheless allied to brilliant deep-set eyes that betokened an acute understanding.

He gave Mr Tinson a slip of paper, on which was written—nothing was said aloud in this well-managed office before a third person, even a client :—

"Lady Caroline Spatcher, third daughter of the fifth Earl of Audley, married Andrew Spatcher 1853, deceased 1882.

"Mrs Morley Tufnell, 25 Chesterfield Street, Mayfair, been there seventeen years."

Mr Tinson looked up and nodded his head to the confidential clerk, who at once withdrew.

"Mrs Morley Tufnell is your only chance, Lady Lezaire, as you see. If you like I will accompany you to her."

"Let us go at once."

A hansom followed the brougham with its grey horse to Mayfair, but discreetly stopped short of Chesterfield Street. Its occupant, however, having discharged it, strolled up the opposite side of the street and took the number of the house at which Lady Lezaire and Mr Tinson were calling. At the top he crossed, and returning on the other side, passed the

brougham just as the visitors were leaving the house.

"You could hardly have expected to find her," Mr Tinson was saying. "No one is in town just now."

"No," Lady Lezaire had replied; "but it only makes a little longer journey. I shall go on to Brighton now; we have her address. Can you come too?"

"Perfectly," said Mr Tinson, adding to the coachman, "Drive to Victoria; Brighton line."

They were resolved to run Mrs Morley Tufnell down. She had a furnished house for the autumn months at Brighton, in Regency Square, where she received them that same afternoon. A middle-aged but still comely woman, somewhat abrupt of speech, and with the self-reliant, self-possessed air of a person who could take care of herself, and had done so for years.

"Don't apologise," she said. "About a servant? Not one of mine?"

"It must be seven years since she was in your service."

"More than that. I seldom if ever change. What was her name?"

"Mrs Leleu. She was housekeeper to you——"

"Oh dear, no; quite a mistake. Never had a housekeeper. Wouldn't. Only in the way. I look after my house myself."

"But she brought a written character from you, from 25 Chesterfield Street, Mayfair."

"That is my house; I have lived there for years. But I never knew Mrs Leleu. Certainly I gave her no written character. I don't like giving characters to servants direct."

"Are we to understand, then," put in Mr Tinson, with the suave impressive manner of the family lawyer, "that the story is a fabrication? You will forgive us, but this is a matter of deep importance. This is Lady Lezaire; I am her solicitor, Mr Tinson, of Lincoln's Inn Fields. We are making inquiries that may have very vital issue."

"I'm sure I am very glad to oblige in any way, but I can only repeat what I have said.

No woman named Leleu was ever in my service. I never heard of her. I don't know her from Adam, or rather from Eve."

"Then the character must have been forged."

"Undoubtedly, if it was given in my name."

With many apologies, which Mrs Tufnell curtly acknowledged, Lady Lezaire rose, and the interview ended.

As they left the house, the same man who had watched them in 25 Chesterfield Street was asking the milkman the name of the lady now living at that house in Regency Square.

As the reader will have guessed, it was an agent of Haggie & Horry, who had obtained ample materials for a report to Mrs Leleu.

CHAPTER LIII.

NOTICE TO QUIT.

Returning to town, Lady Lezaire and Mr Tinson discussed the day's work, and then the whole subject in all its bearings.

"Of course it is now clear that Mrs Leleu is not what she appears. She got into the Hall on false pretences, and probably in pursuit of some nefarious purpose."

"Probably, Mr Tinson? Can you doubt it?"

"Well, no,—although it is not the first case of forged testimonials that I have come across. But her purpose—her purpose? To help Hubert forward?"

"What did she know of Hubert before she came to Straddlethorpe?"

"She knew old Podifat; we are certain of that. Why not his putative son?"

"But how could she help him to succeed? The proofs were authentic——"

"They were so held in law, I admit, but——"

"And discovered quite accidentally——"

"Yes, but by her—don't forget that. It was she who first came upon the desk, you know."

"But the desk was really my husband's; the papers it contained, the confession, were all in his handwriting. That was sworn to, identified beyond doubt."

"I saw it, and believed it to be his. Could the whole thing be a forgery? Now we know Mrs Leleu forged the characters she showed you, she was capable of fabricating other and more important documents."

"Heavens! Mr Tinson, it is not possible. What a tissue of crimes such a suggestion implies!"

"I'm afraid my imagination is getting the

better of me. Let me stick to facts. We must have more. A watch must be set at once on Mrs Leleu."

"I thought of that. I sent Gibbings to tell the whole story to the police at Market Reepham."

"They will hardly act on any information or instructions from him. I will go down to Thorpeshire myself, Lady Lezaire, to-morrow —indeed I had better start to-night. This woman must not be lost sight of for a moment now."

As the shrewd lawyer supposed, the police had not paid much attention to Gibbings, who had indeed taken Market Reepham on his way back to Straddlethorpe the very day he had seen Lady Lezaire. Earswick, who might have been interested in the fresh news, was not within call; the chief constable had left the office; and the senior officer present, wrapped up in his brief authority, was too lofty to listen to the confidences of a stud-groom.

Gibbings did not get back to the Hall till evening, rather late. He was free to come and go much as he pleased, provided only Sir Hubert was out of the way, and that day the young baronet had gone to the other end of the county to a coursing match. He was to sleep away from the Hall, and next morning was to be met at Hazelgrove by his loader with dogs and guns, as there was a party to shoot the General's coverts.

Wednesday, therefore, the day which Lady Lezaire spent with Mr Tinson, was uneventful at Straddlethorpe till the late afternoon, when Gibbings, returning from exercising Devilskin, Sir Hubert's favourite hunter, got a message to say that his master had returned and was asking for him.

Sir Hubert was in the dining-room when Gibbings went in.

"Where have you been all day?" the young fellow asked, looking black and gloomy. "You're never here when you're wanted. Always gallivanting about the country like a

gentleman at large. Where have you been, I say?"

"Not far," answered Gibbings, coolly. "But any way I was doing my work. Devilskin hadn't been out of the stables for a couple of days or more, and I gave him a couple of hours walking exercise."

"You'd no right to take Devilskin out of the stables without asking my leave. You never do ask my leave for anything. You went to London last week."

"Yes; but I asked you first, Sir Hubert. It was about my pension, you know."

"Pension!" cried the baronet, with an oath. "So you say; but how am I to know what you're up to. Some infernal robbery, I don't doubt. Anyway, you ought to be here earning the wages I give you, and attending to my work."

"What can I do for you now, Sir Hubert? I don't wan't to shirk my work."

"Look here," said Sir Hubert thickly, looking up at Gibbings with sullen bloodshot eyes;

"have you ever heard of a Captain Sutton? What 'd you take to shoot him or put him out of the way?"

Gibbings started, but answered quietly enough — "It's not quite in my line, Sir Hubert. I've shot people, perhaps, before now, but they were the Queen's enemies, and I was doing my duty."

"Well, this will be duty—to me, and I'll pay you for it. Anyway, if you won't do it, I shall."

Gibbings looked curiously at his master. Was this sober earnest, or some drunken joke? He evidently had been drinking; he was always in his cups as night drew on. Yet a strength of purpose, a really murderous intention, seemed to shine from his black hateful eyes.

"What Captain Sutton do you mean?" asked Gibbings. "Him in the Scotch Rifles? Or I think there's a captain of that name in the Bombardiers. Anyway, I mind a Captain Sutton on the General's staff some years back

at Malta. Which of them will it be, Sir Hubert?"

"What do I know about your Scotch Rifles or other soldier's jaw! This Captain Sutton, curse him! is down here in Thorpeshire. I saw him t'other side of Hazelgrove this very day."

"Aha! after one of the young ladies, then. Not—surely he hasn't been poaching on your preserves, Sir Hubert?"

"That's just where I caught him. Listen here: I'll tell you the whole story. The ladies came out to the shooting lunch, all but the one girl I wanted to see. I was just sold. They said she was off colour, had a sick headache or something, and had stayed at home. So I swore I wouldn't shoot after lunch, and gave the keeper my gun, saying I'd walk straight home. They all had their bit of a joke; the General grinned, and so did the other girls, who offered to see me part of the way. But I gave them the go-by, meaning to look in at the Grove and ask after Etta, perhaps get a sight of her alone.

"Well, I was going across the gorse near Haverstock Spinney, not a mile from the house, when I thought I saw a bit of muslin—it was a bright pink bit, such as I knew Etta wore—shining through the thicket. I made after it, and soon caught it up—worse luck."

"'Twasn't Miss Etta, then?"

"No one else; but she had another man with her by her side—her lover. He had his arm round her, and—and"—the words seemed to choke him, while his face had grown purple—"he was kissing her, the scoundrel, the blackguard——" A long string of imprecations wound up the speech.

"Lucky you'd left your gun behind you," thought Gibbings, adding aloud, "Who was it, Sir Hubert? This Captain Sutton? Are you sure?"

"She called him Sam, dearest Sam. I guessed at once, for her mother and she had once had words about Sam. I heard them, and I was told all about him."

"Was that all you saw, Sir Hubert?"

"Wasn't it enough? But there was more. He was bidding her good-bye, as he was going a long way off—I wish he was going down to the bottomless pit—and she couldn't bear it, and kept kissing him and asking him to take her with him."

"You won't want to have anything more to say to her, surely?"

"I'd like to pay her off—to kill this chap, then bring her down and break her heart. And if you'll only help me, by George! Gibbings, you shall have anything you like to ask."

"Thank'ee, Sir Hubert, you'll have to apply elsewhere. I'm ready to do my duty in the stable or about the house, or in any honest way; but I'm not quite the man for business of this sort, which is blackguard business at the best," Gibbings said at last, unable to contain himself.

"Then get out, clear out, hook it, before I make you!" roared Sir Hubert, rising in a violent passion, and staggering towards his man. "Don't let me see your face again."

Gibbings stood before his master for a minute or two, with quiet resolute eyes, then as Sir Hubert blenched and fell back cowed, slowly walked out of the room.

They didn't meet again that night. Gibbings, as he turned in, was quite uncertain how to take the notice so roughly and unexpectedly given. Under ordinary circumstances, he would have sent in his book and left the same morning; but there were reasons, as we know, why he should hold on to his place at the Hall.

He was up early next morning, and as usual in the stables superintending everything. By breakfast-time he had seen the horses exercised and fed, the stables cleaned out, and had set the helpers their appointed tasks for the day.

It was nearly nine when, on his way from the stable-yard to the servants' hall, he met Purfrey, who said at once—

"Sir Hubert wants a brougham brought round in less than ten minutes."

"At this time of day?" asked Gibbings,

surprised. "What's taken him? I heard nothing last night about such an early start. Did he say where he was going?"

"No, Mr Gibbings, he did not. Perhaps he'll tell you if you ask him. You're so mighty thick always."

"Come, come, Mr Purfrey; 'tain't my fault. He likes my company, and I swear you can't miss his. He isn't so affable and pleasant-spoken as a rule; and as to his manners, why, you're his master there."

"Well, Mr Gibbings, I've been in high families and served a many real gentlemen, and it's likely I've got something of their ways," said the butler, much mollified by Gibbings's adroit flattery. "I don't envy you Sir Hubert's company, and that's a fact, to-day least of all."

"Is he rougher than usual?" asked Gibbings, remembering the scene of the previous night.

"Fit to be tied, ever since I took him in his letters. There must have been some pepper

in them, or else it was the telegram the boy brought a few minutes ago."

"Aha! And then he ordered the brougham, eh?"

"Straight off, and said it 'd better be round in less than no time, or he'd know the reason why. Wanted the bay mare too, you know."

"The speediest in the stables, I do know. Well, he's only got to say what he wants," and Gibbings, whistling coolly, turned on his heel. Regaining the stables he issued the necessary orders to an under-groom, and himself helped to harness and put the mare into the shafts.

The brougham was at the door, Gibbings standing by, when Sir Hubert appeared, his halting gait, bloodshot lack-lustre eyes, bearing testimony to the extent of the previous night's debauch. But the moment he caught sight of Gibbings his face flushed and his aspect changed. He became greatly excited, and began cursing Gibbings with great force and vigour.

"Didn't I tell you to clear out last night?"

he said, seeming for once to remember, much to Gibbings's surprise, a kind of quarrel which was usually buried in his cups.

"I wasn't sure you meant it, Sir Hubert. Besides, you've got to settle with me," answered Gibbings, stoutly; "and I shall want to know the reason why you give me notice, unless I'm to take that——"

"I won't have none of your impudence," interrupted Sir Hubert. "You've been here a cursed sight too long, and ought never to have darkened my doors; but I know now what brought you. I was a dolt, a double-dyed jackass, to let you in here."

Gibbings seemed to see in this rage something more than his mere refusal to execute Sir Hubert's wild threats against Captain Sutton. Could the baronet have learnt what he was after? But how? Through whom? At any rate, the game was up, now that Sir Hubert was on his guard, and there was nothing to be gained by remaining at the Hall.

Nor was there any longer a reason for submit-

ting to the overbearing insolence of Sir Hubert Lezaire.

"Get out of my way," went on Sir Hubert, pushing Gibbings aside as he still stood there with the handle of the brougham door in his hand.

"You miserable young scamp! Why, I'd knock your silly drunken head off."

Here Gibbings, seizing the baronet roughly by the collar, fairly lifted him from the ground, shook him as a terrier does a rat, and then threw him anyhow upon the cushions of his carriage. After that he banged to the door, shouting to the groom on the box—

"Drive on—anywhere. To the devil, if you like! He'll be glad enough to see you with the cargo you've got inside."

Then, as the brougham disappeared down the avenue, Gibbings went quietly up to his room, got together his modest kit, and took the first train into Market Reepham, meaning to call at the police office again and afterwards proceed to London.

CHAPTER LIV.

A NEW LIGHT.

Mr Tinson was sitting with Captain Bracebridge when Gibbings reached the police office.

"Well, what have you got to tell us?" asked the lawyer. "Anything fresh?"

"That depends on how much you know already," said Gibbings, as he looked doubtfully at the chief constable.

"He's on the right side now, never fear," said Captain Bracebridge, laughing.

"And always was," added Mr Tinson. "Sir Hubert was my client, I admit; but the Lezaires have always been clients of our firm, from father to son these hundred years."

"Your last client don't do you much credit,

if I may make so bold as to say so," said Gibbings. "He's a bad lot, and I'm not sorry to be quit of him."

"You've left his service, then. When?" asked Mr Tinson, eagerly. "That seems rather a pity. You might still have been useful at the Hall."

"Not when he's fly, as I expect he is now. At any rate, he wouldn't let me stop. We parted this morning."

"Is Sir Hubert at the Hall now?"

"No, he drove off somewhere before breakfast,"—and Gibbings proceeded to tell something of the scene at Straddlethorpe.

This sudden departure, and at so early an hour, of a dissolute, lazy young reprobate who always lay late abed, seemed odd. The suggestion from Gibbings that he was on his way to Hazelgrove, or in pursuit of some evil intention with regard to Captain Sutton, was not entirely satisfactory. Mr Tinson, who had had some experience with Sir Hubert, did not believe in his drunken threats.

"It's a thousand pities," the lawyer said, "that you couldn't follow the brougham, or at least notice the direction it took."

"I was wrong, Mr Tinson, to lay hands upon him. But he stirred my bile. I was wild with him, or I'd have known more about that brougham."

"Couldn't some of your people, Captain Bracebridge, give their attention to Sir Hubert? A wire to the out-stations about Straddlethorpe, for instance, asking whether the brougham was seen this morning and the route it travelled, might bring in something," suggested the lawyer.

"It's possible, and it's quite worth trying."

The chief constable summoned a superintendent and gave the necessary instructions.

"See here," interrupted Gibbings. "Why not let me go over to Straddlethorpe? They know me at the post-office there. I might ask for a copy of the telegram sent Sir Hubert this morning."

"Come, come, Mr Gibbings, you'll be getting

us into trouble. What right have you to see that telegram? It was not addressed to you. I can't be mixed up in anything of that kind," said the chief constable, very punctilious, at least upon the surface.

"Your scruples do you infinite credit, Captain Bracebridge," laughed Mr Tinson, adding, with a sly wink to Gibbings, "and I'm sure Gibbings, here, would be sorry to compromise you."

"Oh, of course," added Gibbings. "On no account."

The chief constable took out his watch, and looked at it ostentatiously, as though to remind his visitors that they were wasting his time, although it might have been a wish to escape from an awkward topic.

"I think, perhaps," he went on after a pause, "that some one ought to go over at once to Bulkeley Wells as you suggest, Mr Tinson. If Earswick is here we will send him."

The detective, who happened to be in waiting, was called in.

"You will have to go over to Bulkeley Wells

by the first train and shadow this woman, as the Yankees say. You know her by sight, I suppose?"

"Oh yes, very well; and she knows me."

"Well, stick to her, but don't let her know what you're after, and keep me informed from hour to hour. I think that is all we can do at present," said the chief constable finally, turning to Mr Tinson.

"When would you be likely to hear about Sir Hubert?" asked the lawyer, taking up his hat.

"At any time. It is impossible to say. Where are you staying? At the Raven? Well, I'll send over; or, if you're doing nothing special, look in again here before lunch."

Mr Tinson and Gibbings left the police office together.

"What's your quickest way back to Straddlethorpe?" asked the lawyer.

"You think I ought to go, then?"

"I don't think at all about it: I'm perfectly sure. And I will go with you."

"A fly 'd be best, then, and you can drop me in the village. I'll have that telegram, or a copy of it, or I'll know the reason why."

Knowing Gibbings to be in Sir Hubert's service, and a thoroughly confidential man, the postmistress made little demur to his specious request. Sir Hubert, he said, had mislaid the telegram, and had forgotten part of it. Would she write out another copy?"

This was the message:—

"As I feared, he has sold you. Must see you instantly. Meet me Thrapley Junction, taking 9.50 train from Market Reepham. No excuse; life or death."

"Earswick will have his jaunt for nothing," was Gibbings's first remark, when Mr Tinson had read the copied telegram. "Them police are always late for the fair."

"So shall we be if we stop talking here," interrupted the lawyer. "Let's go on to Thrapley too. We may come across them yet, or hear where they are gone."

They drove back together to the Midland

station at Market Reepham, and there learnt that Sir Hubert had implicitly followed the instructions of the telegram. He had taken the 9.50 to Thrapley Junction.

There was no other train to Thrapley for half an hour, and Mr Tinson utilised the interval in paying a short visit to the chief constable.

Captain Bracebridge had news for them, as he thought.

"I was on the point of sending for you. Here is a telegram from Earswick. What do you think: the bird has flown."

"Mrs Leleu? I know that, and more," replied Mr Tinson, without reading the telegram. "She has gone to Thrapley Junction."

"Earswick says so, and that he has followed her. But how did you find it out?"

"Never mind: that's my affair. But I have no more time. I am going on to Thrapley. Might I make use of Earswick if necessary?"

"Naturally, with regard to the case," replied the chief constable; and Mr Tinson returning to

the station, went on to Thrapley, a small Thorpeshire town lying to the south of Market Reepham some twenty or thirty miles, and about equidistant from it and Bulkeley Wells. The town itself is of little importance, and lies a mile or two from the station, which, however, as a junction for several branch lines, is often crowded and busy.

Mr Tinson studied his Bradshaw as they travelled. The 9.50 which took Sir Hubert from Market Reepham was due at Thrapley at 10.25, a train from Bulkeley Wells reached the junction at 10.40. The meeting, therefore, would be effected easily before eleven. It would be held and over, Mr Tinson feared, long before any of them arrived in pursuit. The train which took him and Gibbings was timed to arrive at Thrapley at 11.45; Earswick might be there a little earlier if he caught the 11.15 from Bulkeley Wells.

The three met on the platform. Earswick began explaining his presence there, when Mr Tinson cut him short, asking quickly—

"Have you seen or heard anything of her here? Go on! Don't waste time. I know why you came here."

"I have seen nothing of her. I was about to make some inquiries when I met you."

"Has Sir Hubert been seen?"

"Here? I'm sure I can't tell. I hadn't the least idea he was coming."

"Of course, we're too late," said Mr Tinson testily, while Gibbings gave vent to an audible growl against their luck. "However, make some inquiries. I suppose you are known here. Come to me in the waiting-room with your report."

It was quite half an hour before the detective rejoined them, but he had found out all there was to know. Sir Hubert Lezaire had been seen at the station talking to a lady whose description answered fairly well to that of Mrs Leleu. They had walked up and down the platform for half an hour or more, waiting, so the regular officials said, for the arrival of the through London express. Sir Hubert had seen

the lady into her carriage, and a little later had gone back to Market Reepham.

"What's to be done now? Ought I to follow her to London?" asked Earswick. "I think I must take the chief's orders first."

"Captain Bracebridge said I might utilise your services," said Mr Tinson. "But I don't think you need go up to town. As you are here on the spot, you had better keep an eye on Sir Hubert and his goings-on. Will you make my compliments to the chief constable and say this? I am going back to London, and you, Gibbings, can come with me. We will deal with Mrs Leleu."

"If you want her, you'd better have some one to watch her on arrival, or you'll lose her for good and all," said Earswick. "She's a slippery customer."

"I'll wire to my clerk to see to that," said Mr Tinson, confidently. "She won't escape him. We shall know when we arrive in town exactly what has become of her."

But in this he was disappointed. Mrs Leleu

was either too wary to betray herself, or she had stopped somewhere short of town. No such person had arrived by the 11.20 express from Thrapley to St Pancras. Of this there could be no possible doubt, as Mr Tinson knew that he could depend upon his clerk.

On the whole, then, as he told Lady Lezaire the same evening, his trip to Market Reepham had been profitless, and for the moment the whole affair was involved in great doubt and perplexity.

"All that is quite certain," he said, summing up, "is, that Mrs Leleu's suspicions are aroused. She is evidently on the alert. Something she has heard or knows obliged her to communicate with Sir Hubert instantly, as she said in her telegram. It must have been either to warn him or to make fresh plans."

"She is a very desperate woman, I am convinced. Equal to anything. And there is no knowing what she may do next," answered Lady Lezaire, with a tremor in her voice and an involuntary shudder.

"I wonder how she knows that we are on the move. That is very curious. She saw you at Bulkeley Wells?"

"No doubt. Frisby, my maid, whom she knows, spoke to her."

"Did she see you with Gibbings?"

"Quite possibly, although I cannot certainly say."

"Even that would be little to justify or explain her action. She must know more. But how?"

"Do you know, Mr Tinson," began Lady Lezaire, nervously, "I have had a strange feeling all day that I was being watched: that some one was following me. I can't quite explain the feeling. It may have been fancy, and yet I don't think it was."

"That's it, depend upon it. She's not the woman to lose a chance. I wonder when the watch began—before yesterday? What have you noticed?"

"The same man, three or four times, wherever I went; a curious-looking man—I always

knew him. It seemed so odd that I should meet him again and again. I think, too, he has been hanging about the outside of the hotel. Probably he is there now. Will you look?"

"No, no; I'm accustomed to these gentry. They're as shy as fieldfares, and he'd be off before I touched the window-curtain. Describe him to me, if you can."

"A short, thin man, wearing a long coat with a cape to it that seemed far too big for him. He had a very small face under a large hat, several sizes too large."

"Ah! that ought to be enough. Now—unless I'm mistaken, this hotel has another exit into Stafford Street. Wait five minutes, Lady Lezaire; let me see what I can make of it."

A man answering exactly to the description of the person Lady Lezaire supposed to have followed her, and who was in fact Haggie & Horry's agent, was indeed on the pavement facing Garraway's Hotel. He was sauntering

up the street towards its Grafton Street end, but his eyes were turned from time to time towards the first-floor window of the sitting-room occupied by Lady Lezaire. He was either listless or preoccupied, for he had paid no attention to footsteps coming behind, and when he turned to patrol the street back towards Piccadilly, he found himself face to face with Mr Tinson.

"Oh! it's you, is it, Jesling?" said Mr Tinson, immediately recognising him. "I was wondering what had become of you. Are you engaged just now?"

"Have you anything for me to do, sir?" asked the man, trying to evade a direct answer.

"Now look here, Jesling: you've done several jobs for me, and you've found me a good paymaster. Make a clean breast of it. What are you up to now?"

"I was only taking an afternoon walk—waiting for a friend."

"Don't lie. I know better than that. You've been dogging Lady Lezaire."

"I haven't, I swear. I never heard of a Lady Lezaire."

"You mayn't know her name, although you're not so smart as I thought you if you don't by this time. But out with it now. Who are you waiting for? Tell me, or I'll never employ you again."

"Haggie & Horry. I do odd jobs for them now and again. They're awful screws."

"Perfectly. I understand. Here's a ten-pound note down. Tell me exactly what you've been at for the last two days, and you shall have another tenner to-morrow."

The temptation was too strong for the spy, and in less than five minutes Mr Tinson understood why Mrs Leleu had taken alarm.

"Do you know who Haggie & Horry are acting for? Better make a clean breast of the whole."

"Some lady in the country, I believe. At least she was in the country. But they're expecting her to-morrow, and I was to go round to meet her in Vincent Square."

"That will do for me," said Mr Tinson. "You shall have the second tenner when you call, and a third if you keep all this to yourself, and let me know what becomes of the lady from the country."

"You'll let me hang on here, I hope. I shall have to give some report to my employers, or they will smell a rat."

"Do your duty by them as fairly as you please. Only I must know what you are going to report to them, so as to strike out anything inconvenient to us. Remember that, and that if I catch you playing tricks I will do worse to you than Haggie & Horry. You understand?"

And with these words Mr Tinson left the agent in the street. Returning to Lady Lezaire, he complimented her on her penetration, and recounted what had passed between him and the spy whom he had caught in the act.

"It is all for the best," he said, rubbing his hands. "We shall hold her now through him. She may watch us: what matter? Her agent is in my pay, and will tell us all she is doing."

"I cannot quite understand what you are aiming at, Mr Tinson. I only know that I feel terribly uncomfortable. There's no knowing what may happen next, with that unscrupulous wretch against us."

"We have got to unmask her, not alone that she should receive her deserts, but that a great injustice, a cruel wrong, should be redressed. Has it not occurred to you how this new light affects your son-in-law?"

"Of course, I saw it at once. I never liked him, and till yesterday I still thought him guilty. Now I cannot but reproach myself for my bitter and vindictive feelings towards him."

"Won't you make it up with them? Offer the olive-branch—at least to your daughter. She, you must admit, was never to blame. It was her duty to stick to her husband."

"Yes, yes; I know all that. But it is so hard to go back, to confess one was utterly in the wrong; I don't know how to begin. How would they receive me? I have been hesitating

and hanging back both yesterday and to-day, while the time is running by."

"They are leaving England, are they not? Gibbings told me something. Is it necessary that they should go now? Things might be so changed for them any day if Sir Hubert were dispossessed again."

"Is that possible? Do you think—do you believe that he is wrongfully at Straddlethorpe?"

"I am allowing my imagination to get the better of me. And yet matters are pointing that way. Much will of course depend on the result of our inquiries and the watch set upon Mrs Leleu. Of course there has been foul play. What is still enshrouded in mystery is the full extent of the crime, for crime there was, and the reason for it. The latter may help us to bring home the guilt."

"Do you think the Colonel's presence in England is essential?"

"He might be very useful. We may want him: I can't say yet. But it would be an

additional strength to have him with us; hitherto, of course, it has been all the other way."

"I presume the St Evelyns would remain if they saw their way? Life has been hard with them of late, no doubt, and he would hardly give up this new appointment without the certainty of other means of livelihood."

"All that could be arranged, I should think, if you choose. A moderate sum would suffice."

"I doubt his accepting a favour from me," said Lady Lezaire. "But I will make the offer, for Rachel's sake and her children's. I ought not to delay any longer. I will go and see them to-morrow."

CHAPTER LV.

MILITARY DISCIPLINE.

Sir Hubert Lezaire, as we know, had returned to Market Reepham alone. Mrs Leleu wished him, for reasons that will shortly be explained, to accompany her to London. But he had pressing business at Hazelgrove.

General Wyndham-Parker received him as usual with great cordiality.

"Sorry you left us yesterday afternoon. You should have shot the Kneston coverts. We had really capital sport. Seventy head to five guns."

"It was as well I didn't stay. If I had I shouldn't have seen what I did, and you

wouldn't have seen me to-day," answered Hubert, in a tone of surly discontent.

"Hey? I don't understand. You didn't see Etta? I know she was on the sick-list yesterday."

"I saw her, in Haverstock Spinney."

"My dear boy, it's impossible, perfectly impossible."

"Saw her with a chap—you know him—being kissed, and squeezed, and hugged, like any common wench, out in the open day."

"Pardon me, Sir Hubert Lezaire," said the little General, with immense dignity. "Am I to understand that your remarks refer to one of my daughters—to Miss Etta Wyndham-Parker, in fact?"

"I can swear she was in Haverstock Spinney, spooning like mad with the man she calls Sam."

"Captain Sutton! the arch-scoundrel. Has he indeed seduced my daughter's affections? I cannot believe it. It is too monstrous, too humiliating, too painful."

"It can't be half so bad for you as for me," protested the disappointed lover.

"I am her father, sir."

"And I am — I mean I want to be her husband."

This was the first direct declaration the young baronet had made, and the General snatched at the occasion.

"Hey? I am quite taken aback. I had no idea you meant marriage, not at least till now. I fancied you admired Etta, and I could understand it. She is not unattractive."

"Meant to marry her: why, what else brought me here?" blurted out Hubert rudely. "I'm mad for her. I can't do without her. I must and will have her."

"Wait, wait, Sir Hubert. Allow me. We are very sensible, Mrs Wyndham-Parker and myself, of the honour you would do us. But we must first think of our own. Let us clear up this miserable business. It may admit of explanation; you may have been mistaken."

"I saw what I saw. Mistake! Who puts

his arm round a lass's waist by mistake? I don't: I mean it. He meant it too, and if I'd had my gun."

"That is the way I should wish to call him to account. But unhappily, I think—it was the only check to outrage and insult—the days of duelling are over. Otherwise, and I would have waived the difference in rank, I assure you, I would have had this impudent fellow out. It is not the first time. I have been under fire before now, as you may suppose."

The General looked a very Bombastes, as though his really peaceful services had filled whole pages of 'Hart's Army List.'

"I'd do for him, double quick," Hubert added, still more bloodthirsty, "just to get him out of the way."

"There will be no need for that. Etta shall have nothing more to say to him, shall never see him again. I can promise you that. She will be guided by her parents, and will choose as we wish. I need hardly tell you, Sir Hubert, whom we should prefer."

"But she must marry me, right away. I won't stand any more of this. It must be either he or me—now, on the nail."

"Of course she will accept you, and you shall marry her with all—convenient despatch. But with people in our position there is much to arrange. I am bound to think of my dear child's interests. There must be settlements, you understand. We must call in the lawyers."

"Hang the lawyers. I'll do whatever is right, whatever other chaps have done before me."

"And the trousseau; it cannot be got in five minutes, or for five pounds. Indeed the trousseau is a serious matter just now. We couldn't let our girl go to you quite empty-handed, and to such a house as Straddlethorpe, where of course you will entertain largely, and she must hold her head high. It must be done properly, liberally. But you, Hubert, you have no notion of the frightful, fabulous cost of female dress and fallals."

"Haven't I, though! I've paid more than one gall's milliner's bill."

"Hush! No more wild oats, you are going to settle down now. I mustn't hear of any such escapades. And in any case I cannot ask you to pay for my girl's things."

If this was intended as a feeler, it missed its mark.

"Although," went on the General quickly, to cover his confusion, "I will confess that I never was so pressed for ready money. You see I get nothing, not one single stiver, from my Irish property, and with my large family the calls are so incessant and so heavy. I shall have to raise an odd thousand or two, I expect."

"Where will you get it?" asked Hubert, with ill-bred inquisitiveness.

"From the bank, I hope. But they're not over-civil to me. I'm not the master of Straddlethorpe."

"Would they advance me cash if I asked them?" inquired Hubert, carelessly.

"Only ask them. Advance? Of course, they'd advance anything to you or your friends. If you like to go with me, now—but

you can't want money, surely," he said, stopping short, and looking hard at Sir Hubert, a prey to sudden suspicions. Was it possible that this future son-in-law, so fortunate and so richly endowed, could be short of cash? To what form of extravagance, what secret vices, could this be due?

"I was pinched by the succession duty, and Tinson has been paying off some mortages. A few thousands would come in very handy for the honeymoon, till they stump up the next half-year's rents and dividends. I've half a mind to try one of them chaps that's always writing to me—Issachar, or Herman Siltberg, or Pampeluna Brothers."

"It is not wise; I would strongly advise you not to get into their hands," began the General very positively, "unless, indeed, you saw no other chance. In which case—why, damme," he said with frank and charming *bonhomie*,—"damme, I'll go with you and see you through it. There!"

Sir Hubert quite jumped at the offer.

"Let's run up to town, then, and work it out of hand. Are you game, General?"

"I'm with you. This very afternoon too, or to-morrow morning. I will meet you in town —you can start at once if it suits you. I won't ask you to stay to see Mrs Wyndham-Parker, or—or——"

"No, not Etta. I'd rather wait. But tell her, General, from me, that I don't bear no malice, that I'll never say one word about the other fellow, if only she'll say Yes. I can't do without her; there's no girl like her in or out of Thorpeshire."

And the young baronet, torn now by jealous rage, now melting into maudlin bewailings, took himself off.

General Wyndham-Parker was glad to be well rid of him. He had business before him which could not keep, and which could best be privately performed.

He meant to proclaim martial law in Hazelgrove; he meant to hold a court of inquiry,

and administer justice with the stern unyielding temper of a strict disciplinarian.

His wife, as commandant of the garrison, was first summoned and taken sharply to task. How could she have allowed such grave irregularities under her very nose? What! the girls might come and go as they pleased, parley with an enemy, correspond, flirt, philander, within gunshot of home, and no one a bit the wiser? Treason, mutiny, insubordination, every flagrant crime was committed, and the General was the last to know.

Mrs Wyndham-Parker had a very bad quarter of an hour with her commanding officer.

"You are responsible for the girls," said the General, in a cold, hard, official manner, "and you have neglected your duty. I can only tell you of it—I cannot punish you."

"My dear, I am not a common soldier, remember," protested his wife. The worm will sometimes turn.

"But I have both power and authority over my daughters, and any one who offends shall

feel the weight of my hand," went on the General, ignoring his wife's protest.

"But they are not little children now. You cannot chastise a grown-up girl, Wilfrid."

"Discipline must be maintained, Maria. Be good enough to send Etta to me at once."

Presently the offending daughter stood before her father, holding herself erect and defiant at her full height. Her cheek was flushed with the rosy hues that fair complexions so quickly take under excitement; her blue eyes were swimming in moisture—tears of anger, not penitence; and her defiant temper might be guessed from the disorder of her auburn hair, glancing bright in the sunlight, which she had not cared to smooth.

The little General was on the hearthrug, Etta in front of him; she was as tall as her father, and seemed quite unabashed by the severity of his frown.

"I am astonished, literally dumfounded," he began, "that a daughter of mine should be so lost to all sense of propriety, of decency"—

he spoke slowly, hoping she would interrupt him, but she stood silently staring at him—"so lost," he went on, "so degraded——"

"What have I done? Come to the point, father."

"You have been carrying on a secret intrigue; you have encouraged the clandestine advances of a lover, a man we disapprove of——"

"I will never give up Sam, whatever you say."

"You shall never marry Captain Sutton with our consent. Understand that, once for all. I forbid you to hold any communications with him. We have had another proposal for you, a very suitable, most desirable match in every way."

"I can guess. It's that mean, hateful, little blackguard from Straddlethorpe. But you shan't sell me to him. I wouldn't take him if he was a duke. I couldn't fall so low. I will marry no one but Sam—no one," she repeated again and again with increasing vehemence, stamping her foot each time.

The General was not sorry to see that she

had lost her temper. Her behaviour warranted severity. He was justified now in imposing penalties, in using coercion, in fact, to vindicate his outraged parental authority.

"You dare, miss, to defy your father! Such rank insubordination is not to be tolerated for one moment. I'll teach you the respect that is due to me and my wishes. You shall go to your room."

Etta flounced away towards the door.

"I don't care," she cried. "You may lock me up, put me on bread and water, starve me; I'll never give in. I love Sam, and he loves me, and we'll stick to each other, whatever you may say or do!"

"Not another word. Go up-stairs at once, to the old nursery. I will send your mother to you. But don't expect me to speak to you again until you submit. Now, go!"

Miss Etta left the room, banging the door defiantly behind her, and flew up-stairs three steps at a time. She understood the sentence. This old nursery, no longer needed for small

children, was still used as a place of penitence and punishment under the Draconian code that prevailed at Hazelgrove. Of late, only the younger children had been consigned to it; but Etta had often found herself a prisoner there in younger days, and it had no special terrors for her.

When Mrs Wyndham-Parker came to her she was waltzing round the room, singing at the top of her voice, so recklessly defiant that her mother's alternate threats and entreaties were entirely wasted on her.

"I don't care; I don't care. I won't be bullied. You shan't make me do what I don't like, however much you may ill-use me. Go back and tell father so."

Then Miss Etta resumed her wild dance. But when Mrs Wyndham-Parker had gone, locking the door behind her, Etta, in her turn, bolted it inside, then rushed to the window, saying, "He is still there; I can easily attract his attention."

It was Joe, the gardener's boy. A window

of the old nursery, which was on the first floor, looked into the kitchen-garden, and Joe, a shock-headed simple youth, was a devoted adherent of Etta's.

That same night a letter to Captain Sutton, describing what had occurred and explaining her situation, was posted in the pillar-box in Haverstock Lane.

CHAPTER LVI.

FORGET AND FORGIVE.

Next day Lady Lezaire, summoning up all her courage, made her way out to Harrop's Green. Sweet Rachel met her as though they had never been estranged. The St Evelyns were still in the same lodging, part of a little house—Lady Lezaire told Mr Tinson afterwards she had no idea houses were ever built so small — in a long, monotonous, terrace street. The exterior, of dingy London stock brick, with its neglected garden and stucco porch, was not inviting; inside confusion prevailed; boxes and portmanteaus in various stages of packing encumbered the sitting-room, from which had already disappeared the few pretty things that Rachel

still carried about to beautify their humble home, and which were next to see the light beyond the Atlantic.

"I heard you were in town, mother," went on Rachel cheerfully. "Gibbings told us so. It is so good of you to come out all this way."

"As you were leaving England, I thought—I felt——" Lady Lezaire began a stammering apology, which Rachel, to spare her mother, frankly accepted and cut short.

"Yes; isn't it good news? We were so delighted. It is such a fine opening for Ferdinand. The climate, you know, is beautiful, although cold: so healthy for the children. You will like to see them, won't you? Little Lucy—we called her after you, mother—is a wonderful child. Only eleven months, and so like you: it is quite absurd."

Lady Lezaire did not speak. She was too touched by the simple unswerving devotion she had done so little to deserve.

"You are a good girl, Rachel," she said presently, as she stooped over the cradle of the

youngest born, "and I might have been a kinder mother. But you must forgive me——"

"Hush, hush, mother dear," said Rachel, kissing her. "After all you have gone through. Please, please do not refer to the past."

The much-dreaded meeting was over, and when the two ladies returned to the little sitting-room, it was as though there had been no gap or gulf, no painful estrangement between them.

"Where is the Colonel?" asked Lady Lezaire. "I shall see him, I hope."

"I am not sure. He is still working at the station—he remains there till the end of the month—and this is one of his long days."

"Is it far? We might drive there on my way back."

Lady Lezaire, quite contrite, was anxious to make the fullest amends. But her face lengthened and her manner stiffened as she saw Rachel hesitating. Colonel St Evelyn evidently was not disposed to meet her friendly advances half-way.

"The Colonel would rather not see me, perhaps. Pray don't think of it."

"It is not that: he will be delighted, only too pleased—he said so this morning—to see you again. But he is so worried always at the station; there is so much going on; it is such a public place, and so horrid. I shouldn't like you to see him there first."

"I think I understand now," said Lady Lezaire, brightening. "But I must see him. Suppose you come in to London to-night and dine at my hotel. You can have a carriage both ways: of course at my expense. Indeed, you must allow me," and Lady Lezaire pressed a couple of bank-notes into her daughter's hand.

"But it is far too much," protested Rachel.

"What is left will be of use, I daresay. You must want many things for the voyage, if indeed you must really go."

This was the point on which she wished to speak with St Evelyn, and she approached the subject with as much trepidation as she had anticipated their meeting. But the Colonel had soon put her at her ease in this as in the matter of his reception. He had come into Lady

Lezaire's room as though they had only met the day previous, and had always been excellent friends. He seemed to take it as a matter of course, talked pleasantly on any and every topic—the weather, politics, Thorpeshire—and applied himself to the excellent dinner he so seldom got nowadays with a heartiness that showed he felt himself at home.

He was quite outspoken about the future, and met Lady Lezaire's shy suggestion that the St Evelyns need not leave England with plain directness.

"Stay? It's not to be thought of, not for one moment. Everything is settled; our passages are taken——"

"Mr Tinson thinks you may be wanted; he has hopes—still vague, of course—that Hubert may be dispossessed."

"We'll come back fast enough then, won't we, Rachel? But it's a far cry to Loch Awe. I am not too sanguine."

"But you might help so much."

"Lady Lezaire, I can't turn my back on my luck.

I've not had too much of late, and four hundred a-year is a fortune, even in the New World."

"You shall not want, Ferdinand." It was the first time she had called him by his Christian name. "The world is not too prosperous with me, perhaps; but for Rachel's and the dear children's sakes you shall share."

"It would be rank robbery, Lady Lezaire. I am not ungracious, I hope. I would have accepted your generous offer a few weeks ago, but now there is no need."

"You know we shall be quite rich in Nova Scotia, dearest mother. They say beef is only a penny a pound, and everything else in proportion. Fish, too, and game most plentiful."

"I hope to be able to supply you with both for nothing, Rachel, unless I have forgotten all I know. It is a rare country for sport; that's another reason for going there."

Lady Lezaire sighed almost involuntarily, for she did not care to revive unhappy memories. But she never could forget that sport had taken Sir Percy Lezaire to this same country.

"Of course, if you have made up your mind to go, I shall not be able to dissuade you," she went on.

"No, mother dear; Ferdy is very obstinate always, and this time I think he is right."

The Colonel pretended to scowl at his little wife.

"As if I wasn't always right——"

But at this moment there was an interruption: a waiter came in to announce—

"Mr Tinson. Would my lady see him if not inconvenient?"

"Do you mind, Ferdinand? or shall I tell him to call to-morrow morning?"

"I mind! not in the least. That is for him to say. He ought to hate meeting me more than I him."

"You had better let him make friends now, Ferdy," interposed Rachel. "I daresay he will be glad to do so, poor man."

"He was doing his duty, or thought he was: I cannot quarrel with him for that, now——"

"He is all on your side," said Lady Lezaire, "and rather ashamed of himself, I expect."

Mr Tinson did not show it when he came up; he was too self-possessed, too much a man of the world, and shook hands quite cordially with the Colonel as though they had never been enemies. Only a slight and very casual reference was made to the past.

"Glad to see you looking so well, Colonel," —after all you have gone through, he would have added, and the words, although not spoken, were understood.

"No thanks to you, my friend," replied the Colonel with a short laugh, and in his most off-hand way. "You did your best to send me out of the world. But never mind all that; I'd rather have you for us than against us, I must confess."

"What is your news?" asked Lady Lezaire, coming to the lawyer's rescue. "Anything important?"

"Well, a good deal has happened to-day," said Mr Tinson, as he sat down and filled his

glass. "You know that fellow who was watching you, Lady Lezaire, promised to put me on the track of Mrs Leleu. He was to meet her this morning at Haggie & Horry's in Vincent Square. The meeting came off, and after that he followed her to where she was staying, a lodging in the Buckingham Palace Road. Having marked her down there he came on to me.

"It seems his job is ended with her. She questioned him a good deal about you, Lady Lezaire, and learnt, so I take it, all she wanted to know; at any rate, he was told he need not follow you further, and was practically dismissed."

"That was this morning, then," said the Colonel, "before you came to us, Lady Lezaire. So Mrs Leleu will not know that we have kissed and made friends."

"I doubt whether she would care to know that. Her object in watching you, I feel sure, was self-defence. When she heard of our trip to Brighton that object was gained; she knew then that we had found out the fraud of obtain-

ing her place with a forged character. And that I am right in this surmise is proved by her having stopped her pursuit. Now is the time to begin ours."

"You have set a watch on her, then?" inquired Mrs St Evelyn.

"At once — directly I heard her address. And it has borne fruit already. Sir Hubert has been with her to-day. He was not long in following her up to town."

"Can you guess what brought him?" asked the Colonel.

"Not positively, although I have my own idea. The point is complicated by the fact that Sir Hubert has not come up to London alone. General Wyndham-Parker is with him."

"Is it possible that he is associated with these wretches?" cried Lady Lezaire.

"Spiteful little beast! He is quite capable of it, and worse," said the Colonel, with hearty disgust.

"But you know they have been trying to catch Hubert for one of their girls; Gibbings

told us that," suggested Rachel. "He is very intimate at Hazelgrove."

"The General may merely want to make use of him. They are on some money business, evidently."

"Wyndham-Parker speculates; I know that. He is a guinea-pig, too, mixed up with all sorts of rotten companies. Sir Hubert Lezaire of Straddlethorpe might be very useful to him if properly worked."

"There is something underhand in this, I feel sure. He would naturally have come to me, for we have not openly quarrelled yet, about any straightforward investment, or the question of settlements, if he thinks of marrying one of the Parker girls. But these two—the General and Hubert—seem to have been going round to the Jews. I hear of them calling at three different money-lenders to-day."

"The General's flying the kite, and has got Hubert to back him; that's about it," said the Colonel.

"That's part of it, but not all. Mrs Leleu is in it somewhere, else why did Sir Hubert call there this morning?"

"Did he take the General with him?"

"No; which shows that whatever the game is, the General is not entirely in it. But we shall know more to-morrow, unless I'm greatly mistaken."

Soon after this the St Evelyns took their leave.

CHAPTER LVII.

ETTA'S CONTUMACY.

Driving across London to their northern suburb, the St Evelyns reached Harrop's Green a little before eleven P.M. On arrival at home, they found the house silent and dark, but there was a bedroom candlestick left by the little lodging-house slavey on a chair in the hall.

By the candlestick lay a visiting-card—Captain Sutton's—and beneath the name was written: "Gibbings brought me. Many apologies. Will call again. Implore you to see me."

"Sutton!" said the Colonel, taking up the card. "What can he want, and at this time of night? Of course we must see him. Rachel,

you know the man; it was through him we came here."

"See him? Certainly. He has every claim on us, and he is well introduced by dear old Gibbings. Besides, it must be something very urgent."

They waited half an hour or more, and then the late caller appeared. Gibbings was with him, but he waited discreetly in the hall.

"How extremely kind of you!" began Captain Sutton. "I am putting you out horribly, I know, but my excuse is——"

"There is no need to make excuses, Sutton," said the Colonel, quickly. "We are only too glad, believe me, to serve you in any way. We know what we owe you. My wife thinks so too; you don't know her yet. Rachel, my dear."

Mrs St Evelyn came forward, and welcomed Captain Sutton very prettily and most cordially.

"It is with Mrs St Evelyn that my business chiefly is. Don't look surprised, Colonel; I

have come to ask her a very great favour. You know, or used to know, the Wyndham-Parkers in Thorpeshire?"

"Oh yes; slightly. Pretty girls, especially one of them—Etta, I think."

The young soldier looked rather sheepish, and hesitated.

"Come, Sutton, out with it," said the Colonel, encouragingly. "We know you've been sweet on Etta; Gibbings told us all about it. And they want her to marry young Lezaire."

"That's just it, Colonel. It's quite devilish to give her to that drunken scamp. And, do you know, they are ill-using her; she is actually under lock and key at this moment, shut up and half starved until she consents."

"Dear, dear!" cried gentle Rachel. "How horrible! how wickedly horrible!"

"It's not to be borne. It makes me wild to think of it. I am determined to put an end to it, and I want you to give me your help."

"What can we possibly do?" asked Mrs St Evelyn, looking hopelessly perplexed.

"Go on, young chap," said the Colonel. "Tell us your idea exactly. You may rely on us."

"It's simply this: I want to carry the girl off; she is ready enough to come. But you see I am starting for Halifax next week."

"So are we," said Rachel, beginning to see daylight. "And you would like her to come with us so that you might get married out there—is that it?"

"Trust a woman's wit to fathom an intrigue," said the Colonel, laughing. "Well, Sutton, is that what you're after?"

"Very nearly; only, I want to marry her first, directly I can get her away; and if you would only—Gibbings assured me I might ask you; I know I am presuming, but it is so urgent, —if you would only receive her, take care of her——"

"And let you marry her from our house. I see it all now," said the Colonel. "It's the least we can do for you."

"Oh, Ferdinand! I don't know. It is surely

wrong to encourage such conduct. Why, it's an elopement—abduction I think it is called."

"She is over age, and the General will be so sold," pleaded Sutton.

"That settles it," said the Colonel, decisively. "I'd do anything to worry him. Bring her here, Sutton, when you please. We'll do the best for her."

"That we will," said Rachel heartily, smothering her last scruples. "It is the best plan. We have to think of her; you must not compromise your wife."

"You are sure you can manage to get her away? Is there anything else we can do?"

"Only tell Gibbings to come with me. I shall want his help, and he seems a stanch chap."

"Gibbings is true as steel, Captain Sutton. He would go through fire and water for us, and, if we asked him, for our friends," said Rachel, as they called the old soldier in and gave him his instructions.

A lover like Captain Sutton, and on such a

mission, was not likely to let the grass grow under his feet. Etta's brief and passionate appeal had stirred him like a trumpet-call.

"Come on, Gibbings; I have a cab waiting. We'll catch the midnight train down from King's Cross."

"Midland's quicker, sir," suggested Gibbings.

"I went that way this morning," replied Sutton, shortly. "Twice in one day by the same line might seem odd, especially if we fail first shot. Besides, we should gain nothing. It's true the Midland train gets in at three, but daylight's not till four, and we shall be there by the Great Northern before that. Can't do anything till daylight."

"You've planned it all out then, sir?" asked Gibbings, with the simple soldier's admiration for a chief with brains and decision.

"To a hair. I can depend on you, can I?"

"Only let me know what I'm to do, sir, and I'm all there,—ready for anything, sir, from pitch-and-toss to manslaughter."

"First, then, get what sleep you can going

down. You won't see the sheets this night. I mean to sleep in the train." And with that peculiar self-command which indicates an utter absence of nervous irritability, the young officer, directly he got into the railway carriage, snored.

Dawn was not due for an hour or more when they turned out of the Market Reepham station without baggage, and quickly left the town on foot by the Haverstock or Hazelgrove road. It was still dark when they reached the first-named place, a small hamlet within a mile of the General's house.

Sutton went straight to an outhouse belonging to the village public, and unlocked the door with a key he produced from his pocket.

"Horse and trap," he said, briefly explaining. "Put them here myself after sundown. They let me have the key, as I said I was a bagman and must be early on the road. Help me to harness the mare."

In a few short minutes Sutton was driving a smart speedy nag in a neat dogcart towards Hazelgrove, and Gibbings sat behind.

There was light in the east—the first few faint streaks—as they approached the house; and while still half a mile short of it, Sutton pulled up.

"Take the reins, Gibbings, and wait here. We shan't be long, I hope. Where's that boy?"

Joe was on the look-out on the other side of the kitchen-garden fence, and did his part promptly and well. A garden ladder was ready just inside the wicket door. They carried it together to the nursery window; Sutton ran up it, while the boy stood watching, and Etta, ready dressed and with a light bundle in her hand, came to the window in answer to the signal.

It was an elopement of the old-fashioned kind, as simple as it was immediately successful.

Sutton only paused to replace the ladder and save the boy from blame. Ten minutes sufficed for everything,—entrance, climb, exit —all.

"Give her her head, Gibbings," whispered

Sutton eagerly, directly he had made Etta snug by his side. The mare went off at score, and the thing was done.

They drove five miles by a country road to a small station, and caught a Market train there to Thorpechester, which was on the Great Western. By this the lovers were conveyed to London, reaching it before noon.

Several hours elapsed before Etta's elopement became known at Hazelgrove. The maid who took up the hot water at eight got no answer to her call, but thought the young lady might be still asleep. There was no answer, again, at breakfast-time, and the regulation punishment-diet of Hazelgrove—one cup of sugarless tea and two pieces of dried toast—remained outside the door. This was construed into sulky contumacy by Mrs Wyndham-Parker, and it was not until nearly eleven that she became inquisitive about her girl. Then the door was found to be bolted inside,—Etta had taken this precaution,—all was silent within, and becoming thoroughly alarmed, Mrs Parker desired one of

the maids to use the very ladder which had helped Etta to escape, as a means of gaining access to the prisoner's room.

Through these delays no news of Etta's flight reached London till mid-day, and then the telegram which Mrs Wyndham-Parker had despatched to her husband lay unopened at the Charing Cross Hotel till long past one. The General had been out all the morning on particular business with his young friend, Sir Hubert Lezaire.

They had an appointment together with Mr Issachar, a money-lender of Mount Street, for noon, and it was with much difficulty that the General had dragged Hubert down-stairs to a late breakfast about eleven.

This was not a meal that had many charms for Hubert, or occupied him long. His morning appetite was never good, and on this occasion was easily satisfied by a teaspoonful of anchovy-sauce thickened with cayenne pepper. Two half-and-half brandies-and-soda followed this scanty but stimulating meal, and Sir Hubert

was so far "picked up" as to be able to face Mr Issachar.

The owner of Straddlethorpe was not a man to be kept waiting in a Jew's anteroom, nor were difficulties and delays likely to interpose between the application for money and the advance of a loan. Mr Issachar, a self-possessed gentlemanly man, with a well-bred manner, and nothing Hebrew about him but the absolute perfection of his attire, received Sir Hubert and the General without delay.

"You are punctual," he said, with a quiet smile. "So am I. Everything is ready, although you gave me little enough time. The sum is large to produce on so short a notice, and the operation not entirely to my liking."

"I don't know where you'd get a better," protested the General, brusquely. "You must know — it is your business to know — what Straddlethorpe is worth."

"I think I know my business. But give me Straddlethorpe as security, and three times the amount is at your service. I shall have no

security, really, but this one life," said Mr Issachar, pointing to Sir Hubert, who sat huddled up in his chair, limp and scowling.

"Had it suited Sir Hubert to raise this money elsewhere and in the ordinary way, we should not have come to you. I suppose you know that."

"Thank you; I know my business perfectly," replied Mr Issachar with quiet insolence. "It suits Sir Hubert to come to me, and it suits me to do what he wants on my terms. There they are,"—he pointed to the bills lying on the table,—"and there is my cheque-book. You sign the one, and I will fill up the other."

Sir Hubert, who had not spoken yet, began now to show signs of impatience.

"What's the good of all this jaw?" he said, snatching the money-lender's bond from the little General, who, with eye-glasses carefully adjusted, had begun to read the document. "You hand over the dibs; I'll sign anything. Where do I put my name?" and following Mr Issachar's indication, he scrawled his clumsy,

ill formed "Hubert Lezaire" upon the stamped paper.

"Now, General, if you will oblige me," said Mr Issachar. "Thank you; that is for the smaller amount; now, please, the other."

"Pardon me, but that sum is advanced to Sir Hubert Lezaire, not to me; I have nothing to do with it."

"Sir Hubert has signed your bill; you must sign his. I cannot separate the transactions; it is a joint affair."

"But I should become responsible if anything happened. I cannot take such a risk," protested the General.

"Then the whole thing is off," said Mr Issachar. "I must insist on having both names to each bill."

"Curse it all, General!" said the baronet, with rising anger. "What are you afraid of? It will be all in the family, you know. Besides, I'm bound to take up the bill directly I square Tinson. But I only came here to oblige you; it's just as you please. We'll put

the bills in the fire and take our hook out of this."

"Is it to be so?" said Mr Issachar, holding the bills in his hand and approaching the fire-place.

"No, no; I'll sign." After all, Sir Hubert was to be his son-in-law, as the General thought, and this hesitation was both ungracious and unwise.

"You would like cash, perhaps," said Mr Issachar, when the operation was completed. "My banker's, the Britannia Joint Stock, is only round the corner. I will send for it."

Both the General and Sir Hubert preferred the notes; the first, because he did not choose to pass a money-lender's cheque through his account—the latter, for reasons of his own.

"Take my example, Hubert. Get rid of all these notes. Pay them in at once."

"All right, General; I know what to do with them. Which is your way now?"

"Back to Charing Cross. Isn't it yours?"

"No. Don't expect to see me till feeding-time, and I may be late then."

But the General returning to the hotel, found his wife's telegram and returned post-haste to Hazelgrove. He left a few lines for Sir Hubert, but without betraying the real reason of his sudden recall. Etta's elopement had to be concealed, at least until proof that the mischief was irreparable.

As for Sir Hubert, he went straight to Buckingham Palace Road and remained there for several hours. This was the report made by Mr Tinson's agent, who was on the look-out in front of the house occupied by Mrs Leleu.

Sir Hubert's visit to Mr Issachar was also duly reported, and the lawyer resolved to pay a visit to Mount Street himself.

He and Mr Issachar were already acquainted. The great people who did business with Harvey & Tinson were sometimes impecunious; peers on the verge of bankruptcy, and heirs-apparent whose succession was long delayed, frequently went to Mount Street when they could not get

money at Lincoln's Inn. In the final settlement, however, which came inevitably, the lawyer and the money-lender were brought face to face.

Their relations were perfectly amicable. They were both men of business, and interfered little with each other. As Mr Issachar said, he only picked up the bone when the other threw it away.

"You've been doing business with a client of mine this morning," began Mr Tinson, abruptly.

"Which of them? I expect we have many clients in common," replied Mr Issachar, blandly.

"Young Lezaire, at present master of Straddlethorpe, though there's no saying how long he'll be there."

"Is there any doubt of his title, then, to the estates?" asked Mr Issachar, anxiously.

"It isn't all plain sailing, that's all I can say now."

"Might I ask as a favour that you will

give me an early hint of any probable change?"

"Yes, on one condition: that you tell me exactly what Sir Hubert got from you to-day."

"Ten thousand pounds, in notes."

"Have you kept their numbers?"

"Of course. Perhaps I ought to have kept the notes."

"I won't say that, but you had better protect yourself, and recover when you can."

This was all that Mr Tinson wanted to know. It was impossible to dissociate some pressing demands from Mrs Leleu from the borrowing of this considerable sum. Extravagant as was Sir Hubert Lezaire, the yearly income of Straddlethorpe was yet more than sufficient to meet the outgoings at the Hall.

He made a memorandum of the numbers of the notes given to Sir Hubert, and thanking the money-lender, took his leave.

CHAPTER LVIII.

PER S.S. APOLLO.

The steam-tender was alongside the landing-stage at Liverpool, waiting to take off passengers to the great Atlantic liner which lay out in the stream with anchors atrip and blue-peter at the fore. There was the customary confusion, the hurry-scurry of departure—cabs arriving at a gallop with late starters, porters rushing about with luggage, friends and relations interchanging tearful farewells.

The St Evelyns and their friends made a small group by themselves on the deck of the steam-tug. They and their children, the faithful Gibbings come to see the last of them, the Suttons,—now man and wife—he triumphant as

one who had dared and won, she radiant and blushing, as became a bride only three days old.

The marriage had taken place at St James's, Piccadilly. Etta had scouted the idea of a registry office, and had been backed up stoutly by Mrs St Evelyn. Women will not forego the service in church.

It was all easily arranged, so easily that Sam wondered he had not been married a dozen times already. The old gentleman at Doctors' Commons, in college cap and gown, who gave him a licence, seemed quite to expect him; and at the church, which was only round the corner from his lodgings in Duke Street, the confidential pew-opener "tumbled" very readily to the idea of a very quiet, not to say secret marriage.

Etta was greatly perturbed till it was all settled, even afterwards. Now, when safe under her husband's wing and actually afloat, she saw her father in every fresh passenger, and heard his irate voice in the short commands issued by the captain of the tug.

"Now, cast loose. Who's for the shore? Here! hi! You're too late"—the gangway had been run off; "you'll have to go with us and wait till we run back for the next load. Hold hard, will you? stop him! he'll break his neck."

The remarks were addressed to Gibbings, who, seized by some strange uncontrollable impulse, had suddenly left his friends, and finding the gangway gone, had jumped on to the landing-stage.

"Oh, how dangerous! How foolish of him! What can have happened?" cried Mrs Sutton, in great alarm.

"Off his chump, I should think," said Captain Sutton, coolly. "Gone cracky. Look! he's running up the quay like mad."

"He might at least have waited to say goodbye," observed Mrs St Evelyn, a little hurt at Gibbings's unexpected disappearance. "He promised to go on board with us and take back the very latest news to dear mamma."

"Leave Gibbings alone, Rachel. He knows

what's what, and he had some reason for his sudden bolt, you may be perfectly sure."

There was reason enough, as it seemed to Gibbings.

Just as the steam-tender was putting off he had caught sight among the crowd on the wharf of two people whom he recognised at once. They had driven down to the edge of the landing-stage, and approaching with bags and bundles as though intending to go on board, had come to a dead halt, exchanged a few words, then turned tail and regained their cab.

They were old Podifat and Mrs Leleu. Apparently they had no desire to meet the St Evelyns. At least so Gibbings quickly concluded, as with a second quick thought he jumped ashore to follow them, and if possible see more.

The cab drove up Water Street. Gibbings hailed another cab and followed. The first cab followed the quay-side, then turned up a narrow water-side alley and plunged into the labyrinth

of streets that surround the docks. So on till James Street was reached, and there the cab halted before the door of the Dominion Steamship Co. Mrs Leleu got out, so did Podifat, and both entered the office.

Gibbings waited, keeping his cab, till the others issued forth again, and heard them instruct their driver to take them back to the landing-stage. Then he entered the Steamship office and made a few inquiries.

"I've missed some friends of mine who have a passage in the Apollo, and the tender's gone without them. Have they been here?" Gibbings asked a clerk.

"What like are they?"

"Middle-aged man, and a lady in black."

"In here just now. You'll catch them. They're going off by the mail-tender at 1.30. But if they miss that they'll have to go on to Londonderry; that's the very last chance. I told them so, and I tell you."

Gibbings thanked the clerk and withdrew.

"So they are going to Halifax too—one or

both, and in all conscience — why? That's what I must know."

It was then barely twelve. He had a clear hour and a half to settle his plans; disguise himself, watch the pair, follow them on board—anything that he might think best.

Gibbings drove at once to the Adelphi Hotel and asked for Lady Lezaire.

"Is it a coincidence, do you think, or intentional?" she asked, on hearing of Mrs Leleu's appearance at the landing-stage. "They mean, perhaps, to do harm to Rachel, the children. How is it to be averted? We must warn them, if it isn't too late. What do you propose? How can I help?"

"Well, my lady, you can help, I think, and I'll tell you how. Will you advance me—say twenty or thirty pounds?"

Lady Lezaire went to her jewel-case and took out five five-pound notes.

"There are twenty-five pounds. Go on."

"I must first make certain they're going by

this boat—if so, I'll go too, and keep my eye on them all the way."

"Will it be safe? Won't they recognise you?"

"My mother wouldn't—if I had a mother—or you, my lady. Wait; you'll see."

There was nearly an hour to spare still. A part of this time, and some of Lady Lezaire's cash, Gibbings spent in buying a red wig and a short beard of the same colour; a blue suit, pilot jacket, and wide trousers, with a soft hat and a big comforter, successfully transformed him into a long-shore colonial sea-captain, who—as he proposed to say—was returning to his friends after being cast away and picked up at sea.

He secured a fore-cabin passage ticket as he passed down to Water Street on his way back to the landing-stage, where he found Podifat and Mrs Leleu waiting to embark.

They were in close but whispered talk, and Gibbings thought it safer to make no attempt to listen, saying to himself—

"I shall have more chances than this on board. It would spoil all to attract their attention. But holloa! she's not going. What am I to do now?"

Mrs Leleu was shaking hands, while Podifat stood on the gangway.

"Let me hear," were her parting words. "Right away; cable — whatever it costs, I must know. Good-bye."

Then she walked up the landing-stage, and away from the quay-side.

Gibbings, called upon to choose, promptly decided to follow her and not Podifat.

"I'll catch him up and the Apollo at Londonderry. Let's first see what becomes of her."

Mrs Leleu went straight to a small hotel in Dale Street, then to the Lime Street Station, where she took a ticket—Gibbings overheard—to Thorpechester, the nearest station to Market Reepham.

"I'll let my lady know—she can communicate with the lawyer—and then I'll travel to

Holyhead and Paddy's land. I shall be a good day ahead of the Apollo."

It was night-time when, with the mails and a number of other passengers, Gibbings steamed out of Londonderry to join the great liner.

He found his berth without much difficulty, and at once turned in. The work now before him was merely to watch and wait. Podifat could not do much mischief on board ship. Possibly he was meant merely to act the spy, not to do actual bodily harm. Of this, however, the Colonel would be the best judge when he was told what had occurred.

Gibbings saw Podifat next morning at the steerage passengers' table, a prey to discomfort, and not particularly on the alert. There was little fear of recognition from him.

Friends showed an equal want of penetration. Gibbings waited for a chance of accosting Captain Sutton—he did not wish to risk the surprise or suspicion that might follow the making himself known to St Evelyn—and this chance did not come for a day or two. Saloon and

steerage passengers do not meet much, except when the former extend their deck walk to the fore-part of the ship.

"Morning, Captain," said Gibbings gruffly, the first time they met.

"Holloa! Who the devil are you?" answered Sutton.

"I'm afraid Mrs Sutton don't like the passage —haven't seen her on deck. Hush—don't shout out. I'm Gibbings."

Sam Sutton laughed aloud.

"Scissors! You are a rum customer. Last time we saw you, you tried to get drowned. Have you shipped now as an A.B.?"

"Beg your honour's pardon for making so bold," said Gibbings, suddenly changing his voice and his manner. "But I wants a good word on landing. There are chaps listening," he whispered. "Tell the Colonel I want to speak to him—quietly, soon. He'll know best how to arrange."

"I'll see you again. Come to the fiddle, you know, the smoking-room, at eight bells."

Sutton by that time had told St Evelyn what to expect, and Gibbings was made free for once of the poop-deck, which he patrolled with the Colonel, talking over the past and making plans for the future, till a late hour.

CHAPTER LIX.

"FISHY—SYDNEY."

THE Apollo's voyage was prosperous. On the sixth day out they made the Banks, and missed the fogs that so often greet vessels approaching Newfoundland.

Two days more and they were within easy steam of Chebuctoo Head, the chief gate of the vast land-locked harbour of Halifax.

The Apollo's stay there would be short; only the few hours necessary to discharge and take in passengers. Every effort was made on board to save time; especially, as the sea was smooth and the weather fair, to get up the heavy baggage from the hold without waiting arrival in port.

The upper deck was soon lumbered with heavy cases and sea-chests, of which the St Evelyns owned a modest share. The funds so generously advanced by Mr Carrington Lomas had been wisely expended in outfit and goods, which could be bought more cheaply at home than in the colony.

The Colonel's military training had made him an excellent "baggage-master," and he was proud, not without reason, of his skill in packing, and of the order and system applied to the care and disposal of his belongings.

One notable precaution — copied from the practice of a regiment on the line of march —was to plaster a great printed label on every case or package, bearing his name, ultimate destination, the number of the case, and its uses during the voyage. The address was:—

COLONEL ST EVELYN, ( ) . SYDNEY, CAPE BRETON. *Per* S.S. APOLLO. *No.*

while the lighter pieces had the word "Cabin," and all the heavy the word "Hold."

Light and heavy alike were now mustered under the owner's experienced eye, to be counted and examined; while Gibbings, with a pipe in his mouth, sat a little way off on a coil of rope, quietly observant, but unable for prudential reasons to assist his old master.

Some one else had an eye on the St Evelyns' baggage—that was soon evident. From the moment the hold was opened Podifat had come aft and had loafed about as near as he dared.

Presently the Colonel, satisfied that all was right, rejoined his wife upon the poop. Then Gibbings saw Podifat slily draw near the baggage and examine it in his turn.

He was reading the address-label—that's what he was at. From mere curiosity, or with some special purpose? Gibbings could not be sure.

A preconcerted signal to Captain Sutton soon brought the young officer to where Gibbings now stood waiting.

"Tell the Colonel," the latter said, "what I caught the old rascal doing—that I'll stick to him when he gets on shore and see where he goes. If I happen on more, I'll come or send to the Colonel's hotel—which is it, by the way?"

"The Acadian, in Della Torre Street."

"If I don't turn up there I'll join him later on at Sydney."

"But how are you off for coin, Gibbings? You may run short."

"My lady stood paymaster before I started, and I'll do fine for some weeks."

"Remember, the Citadel Barracks will always find me—the regiment's there. I owe you more than one good turn, Gibbings, and if I can repay you I'll——"

"Don't talk about it, sir. And don't stop with me now, that son of a gun might suspect something. Give my message to the Colonel, that's all. I've got my work to do now. He's a slippery old chap, and knows his way about, I think, in these parts."

Old Podifat was one of the first to go over

the side when the Apollo made fast by the wharf. He landed by the steerage gangway forward, and carried all his belongings with him. His gun-case, nearly new, Sir Hubert's gift, in one hand, with the other he held his salmon-rod, also in its case, and from the same source. A light bundle hung from the latter, and contained all his personal kit.

Gibbings, still more lightly equipped, was close at his heels. Halifax was new ground to him, but clearly not to the man he followed.

Podifat went straight up the by-street that led from the wharf with the confident air of one who knew his way, although, as he emerged into the better part of the city, he looked up and around as though surprised and bewildered. Since he had last seen Halifax it had been burned down more than once, and emerged a handsome stone phœnix from the wood ashes of its older construction.

Approaching Hollis Street and the best quarter of the city, he paused to ask a question, which Gibbings overheard, and for which, re-

collecting what had occurred at the Liverpool landing-stage, he was pretty well prepared.

"Telegraph office? Why, it's with the post-office in the Provincial Buildings, second street to left, third block. Can't miss it."

"All right, old hoss," said Podifat, going on his road without halting or turning round.

Gibbings paused on reaching the telegraph office, doubtful whether to enter with him or wait outside. Following a sudden impulse he passed the doors, and seeing Podifat busy at the desk slowly and painfully shaping his letters, took post near him unobserved. He was within earshot when Podifat handed in his message to the operator. It was a wretched scrawl, almost illegible.

"Where did you get your schooling? Satan! what a fist! L—e—l—" went on the clerk, spelling it letter by letter.

"Leleu, Straddlethorpe, Thorpeshire, England," shouted Podifat. "I can read it if you can't."

"I ain't deaf, my man. You'd better read the rest. F—i—s—k, fisk. What's fisk?"

"Fishy, you fool! fishy, Sydney. That's all you've got to send."

"No signature? Or maybe your name's Sydney."

"What's my name to do with you? How much? Seven dollars? Who—up! That's tall. There's the mopusses," and Podifat turned to leave the office.

"Here! hold hard! Sign your address at the bottom."

"Shan't! Haven't got one. I'm only just landed from the mail, and I'm going straight home."

"Where's home? That'll be good enough for us."

"River Inhabitants, Canso Straits. D'ye know that township? That's where I was born and bred, and where some day I'll die, if I'm 'llowed to die in my bed."

"You'll maybe die with your boots on, Mr Sydney, if that's your name. What can I do

for you?" went on the clerk to Gibbings, and turning his back on Podifat, who straightway left the office muttering curses as he went.

Gibbings accounted for his presence by inquiring about the telegraph rates to San Francisco and New York, then hurried from the office after Podifat, whom he tracked finally to the railway station, where he heard him ask his way to Canso Straits, and heard the answer.

"Train to Truro and Pictou—take the stage on, or there is a steamer runs from Pictou to Port Hawkesbury twice a-week. You can get on from there again by steam ferry, or stage, where you please."

"Pointing homeward, that's evident," Gibbings said to himself. "We shall know where to pick him up again if we want him. But ought I to follow him there? I can at any time, if I like. I'd better consult the Colonel, perhaps. Anyway, I've found out a good deal already."

There was a council of war when Gibbings reached the Acadian Hotel with the latest news.

The meaning of the cablegram was first discussed.

"Sydney of course refers to us," said the Colonel. "Mrs Leleu clearly wished to know our destination. Why the other word fishy?"

"It can't refer only to Sydney itself," mused Mrs St Evelyn. "Of course a seaport is fishy?"

"We must take the other, the slang meaning of the word, my dear. Fishy is unsatisfactory—dangerous, in fact. That's what Podifat implies. Our being at Sydney will be fishy for them, d'ye see?" went on the Colonel.

"No doubt, Ferdinand, that is it. But why?"

"We may find out when we get there. Podifat perhaps may help us—we mustn't let go of him."

"I may catch him still at the station," said Gibbings, starting up.

"No, he might see you. We know where he is going. This Canso is not a long journey from Sydney: the Canso Straits separate Cape

Breton Island, unless I have forgotten my geography. But let's have up the map."

They had a large survey-map of the whole colony of Nova Scotia in the hotel, and it was soon unrolled on the table before them.

"Canso? Canso? Why is the name so familiar to me?" asked Mrs St Evelyn.

"To be sure—I remember now. It's the place where Priscilla Spary came from: Hubert's mother, your father's first wife," went on the Colonel.

"Don't speak of her," began Rachel, with manifest disgust. "But stay. Here is Louisville, where the marriage took place. It cannot be far from Sydney—what is it?"

"By the scale, some twenty-five to thirty miles."

"Then we know now why they think it fishy," quickly concluded Rachel. "These are fresh clues which must surely lead us to more."

"They must be followed at once," said the Colonel, decisively. "Are you game to go on, Gibbings?"

"For you, and the mistress, and the children, sir, I'd go on into the bush, round the world, to the North Pole! Only give your commands."

"Well, then," the Colonel was again studying the map and the colonial railway guide, "you must pick up this Podifat somehow and somewhere, but as soon as you can. He will only have a short start, even if he took the first train to Truro and Pictou. The day is still young, and you will catch the later train. This will land you at Pictou in plenty of time for the next boat to Port Hawkesbury—to-morrow night, or for to-morrow morning's stage for Antigonish. Do you understand? Or shall I give you a route-paper, as if you were going on escort?"

"Tell me the names all over once or twice, sir. They're strange, and I may forget them."

Gibbings soon learned his lesson by heart.

"I know my drill now. It's all straight and plain. Only I'd like to know how I am to send you word, or get on to you if there's anything

important," he asked, as if prepared to take his departure.

"Here, Gibbings," said Mrs St Evelyn. "I had thought of that. These envelopes are addressed to the Colonel—post one anywhere if you want help; the post-mark will bring us to you, or come to us with your news. We shall be only too glad to see you, my good friend."

Then she shook hands cordially with the stanch old soldier and bade him God-speed.

A couple of days later the St Evelyns again embarked, now upon a small steamer that plied between Halifax and Cape Breton. The Suttons remained in the garrison city, but it had been agreed that if Sam could get leave he was to bring his wife to visit St Evelyn, while he joined the Colonel in a hunting expedition after bear and cariboo among the forest solitudes that margin the great Lake Bras d'Or.

CHAPTER LX.

HUNTERS AND HUNTED.

Gossip flies fast in a country neighbourhood. For all the General's anxiety to silence scandal, his daughter's elopement was common talk within twenty-four hours. The servants at Hazelgrove knew exactly what had occurred, and knowing, were not likely to hold their tongues. The story crept out into the village, whence, with many additions, it travelled through the county to Straddlethorpe, where Sir Hubert heard it from his butler the day he returned from town. This was on the Tuesday following the negotiation of the loan, and on the very day of the departure of the Apollo.

"You lying thief!" cried Sir Hubert, aiming

a blow at Purfrey with the butt-end of his driving-whip. "Miss Etta bolted! I'll teach you to spread such lies."

"It's gospel truth, Sir Hubert. She went last Thursday. I've seen a chap as met the trap just half a mile out of Thorpechester."

"Last Thursday! Then old Parker must have known, and he never let on a word. Why did he want to keep it dark from me? Sinful old rogue! Curse him—and her. But what's come of her? Has he gone after her? I'd like to go with him, if it was only to be even with them as got her away."

As the result of further thought, backed up by a late lunch and a decanter of strong brown sherry, Sir Hubert mounted his horse and rode over to Hazelgrove.

"My dear boy," began the General with elaborate friendliness, "when did you get back? I had been hoping to hear of or from you, wondering why you stayed on in town. Sly dog! Boys will be boys, and London, with money to spend, is a most delightful place."

No word of Etta's flight. Even Sir Hubert, with dull brutish mind, half dazed with drink, detected a want of candour.

"Look here, General! you ain't acting fair and square with me. I know all about it. Where's Etta?"

"My dearest boy," repeated the General, putting his hand to his face and struggling with emotion, "how was I to tell you! But you will forgive me. If you could know the grief, the pain and anguish I suffer, to think a girl of mine should so far forget herself! I think —I feel sure—all my children are not like her."

So many days had elapsed since the elopement, that the General had abandoned all hope of recovering Etta and smothering up the scandal. It was too generally known, both the flight and the harsh treatment that had preceded it. Moreover, the transaction with Mr Issachar rendered it imperative that the General should keep on good terms with young Lezaire. Perhaps Sir Hubert might now transfer his attentions to one of the other girls.

"Tell us more about it," asked Sir Hubert, rudely. "When did she go? How? With whom?"

The General gave a short account of the affair, so far as he had elicited the details.

"It was that Sutton, of course. Why didn't I do for him?" cried Sir Hubert. "But I'll have his blood yet."

"Hush! hush! my dear boy. I can understand your feelings. But such dreadful threats——"

"Which way did they go? Have you tracked them? Aren't you going to follow them up?"

"Yes; but which way shall we follow? I haven't the least idea what has become of them."

"Have you made no inquiries, General? What have you been doing all these days?"

General Wyndham-Parker did not like to confess that he had abstained from all action because he was ashamed to take it. He hated the scandal, and wished to attract no further

attention to it. An unpleasantness that cannot be mended is best allowed to blow over.

"Well, I have been so much upset—my dear wife has been so ill—that I couldn't take any steps. But if you wish it—and I think I ought—I will go to the police. Some inquiries should be set on foot. I ought to know what has become of her, wicked, misguided girl though she be. Will you ride in with me to Market Reepham? I will order a horse. We will call on the chief constable."

"I don't think you will want me for that, General," said Sir Hubert, with the strange reluctance he always showed to be brought into close relations with the police. "I'm game to go with you anywhere, after them; or I'll go alone, if only you give me the tip. Come on to Straddlethorpe after you have seen if there is anything to tell, or I will come back here."

The conversation which followed was desultory, a repetition and variation of that which had gone before. It was ended when they parted in Haverstock: the General riding to

Market Reepham, Sir Hubert returning to the Hall.

Old Purfrey met him with a telegram.

It was from Mrs Leleu.

"News; meet me Market Reepham station four-thirty."

It was then nearly four.

"Run round to the stables," shouted Sir Hubert to Purfrey. "I want a carriage, the brougham, in less than five minutes. Look slippy, all of you, or you'll get the sack."

Sir Hubert was in such haste that he followed himself, and helped to harness and put to.

"Make room there!—give me the ribbons," he said to the groom, and flogging the big mare in the shafts, began a wild break-neck drive which got him to Market Reepham just within the time.

Mrs Leleu was at the window of a second-class compartment as the train ran in, and at a signal from her Sir Hubert turned away to leave the station. She followed close, whis-

pering, "Come on; into the town, anywhere private. I want to speak to you quietly."

"Here, jump in." Sir Hubert held open the brougham door. "He can drive towards the Hall, or on the Thorpechester road. What have you got to tell me that wouldn't keep?"

"That blackguard Colonel has started for America—I fancy for Halifax. They told me as much at the steam-packet office."

"Is he fly, think you? Has he gone out alone?"

"No; all his brood is with him. That's what I don't understand. He may be going out to settle, but why there? I don't like it, not a little bit."

"What can you do?"

"It will depend on what I hear."

"Jacob is going in the same ship. He is to let me know at Straddlethorpe—I gave him that address—and I've come here to wait for more news."

"You don't want to wait at the Hall, do you?" asked Sir Hubert, sulkily.

"Somewhere near. Why, ain't I welcome? Have you got some madam or missy there? I don't care—so long as it isn't that white-livered jade you wanted to marry. But you can't do that, not now."

"How do you know that? You have heard, then, she's gone?"

"I guessed it. I saw her this morning—I was going to tell you—saw her with her man."

"What!" screamed Hubert. "Saw her! And you didn't tell me! When, how, and where did you see her?" He clutched his companion fiercely by the arm.

"On board the tender; going off to the Apollo with that man—the same man as used to come philandering after her down here. They were with the St Evelyn lot, under their wing."

Sir Hubert's next remark was spoken to his coachman through the front window of the brougham.

"Drive back to town—to the police office. Drive like hell, d'ye hear!" he shouted.

"Not there. Don't go there; it isn't safe. I'd rather they did not see us together," protested Mrs Leleu.

"There is no reason they should. You can sit back in the brougham and wait while I run in. I must see old Parker. I may catch him there."

The General was still with the chief constable in the outer office on the first floor when Sir Hubert burst in.

"I've heard of her. She has gone by steamer this morning."

"One moment, my dear fellow," interposed the General. "What extraordinary story is this? How on earth have you heard, and how much?"

Sir Hubert Lezaire, without surrendering the source of his information, repeated what Mrs Leleu had told him.

"By the Apollo, from Liverpool, this morning?" said the chief constable, turning over the leaves of the office "Bradshaw." "For Halifax and Portland, *viâ* Londonderry."

"Then we shall catch them at Londonderry if we give chase. Yoicks! Tally-ho!" and Sir Hubert gave an unearthly yell. "Come along, General; you shall tear her from them. It's no good going without you."

"From them?" asked the General, amazed.

"Yes, them; the St Evelyns. She's with that murdering Colonel and silly white-faced Rachel. I know. Some one has told me who saw them all together."

"Colonel St Evelyn? To dare to mix himself up with my affairs! He ought to have been hanged, and will be yet."

"If he isn't drowned," said Captain Bracebridge, laughing. "But seriously—you don't tax him still with that Straddlethorpe crime?"

"I'm as certain still as if I'd seen him do it. The law made a ghastly *fiasco* there. Do you mean to say you don't agree with me?" went on the General, seeing the chief constable shake his head.

"I don't; I never did, thoroughly—but less than ever within the last few weeks. Some-

thing very curious has turned up, you know."

"What! More evidence? Some fresh clue?"

"The strangest and strongest clue. We came the other day upon—— Wait a moment," said the chief constable, suddenly correcting himself. He saw that Sir Hubert, with eager face and wide-open eyes, was listening to every word. "Come inside," and Captain Bracebridge led the way to an inner private room, and closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER LXI.

ONLY A WOMAN'S HAIR.

The inner room to which Captain Bracebridge conducted General Wyndham-Parker was his own private office, comfortably furnished, with an arm-chair beside the writing-desk, into which the chief constable motioned the General, while he himself went to a cupboard in the corner of the room. This cupboard he unlocked with a key from his own bunch.

"I call this my curiosity-shop," said Captain Bracebridge. "It is a sort of museum where I keep under lock and key anything connected with big cases. Here, for instance, is the gun seized from one of the Blythwood poachers; you remember the case, when police constable

Davis was shot. And this is the identical saucepan in which Mother Raskelf boiled her husband after she had chopped him up with a hatchet. And this is a bit of the rope that hanged her and her precious boy, who was an accomplice."

"Very curious, certainly," replied the General, shuddering. "But what have these things to do with the Straddlethorpe case?"

"Nothing, of course. But this has, and it is what I wanted to show you." Captain Bracebridge now produced the celebrated Inverness, which had been added to the museum after Earswick had brought it over from the North Lodge.

"That greatcoat! Surely it isn't the Colonel's missing Inverness?"

"But it is, and nothing else. I should have recognised it from the description. But besides, it was identified by the Colonel's man, Gibbings, who helped to find it."

"Doesn't that look rather suspicious? You remember it was his evidence that saved the Colonel. Probably he was an accomplice."

"The circumstances under which the coat was found satisfactorily dispose of that suspicion," said the chief constable, as he went on to detail the facts.

"Then you think it had been hidden there in the Straddlethorpe Lodge on purpose?" asked the General, after he had heard the whole story.

"I do, and by the persons, or more exactly the person, who had used it as a disguise."

"But—but that is bringing us on to the trail of the real culprit, always supposing it was not the Colonel. Why should not he have hidden the coat?"

"You don't give up a point easily, General," said Captain Bracebridge, with a smile. "I should be sorry to have you against me. But how could the Colonel have worn it? It was decided in court that he never went to Cleobury the night the poison was bought."

"Only on Gibbings's evidence, which I have never believed. I must have more than that to satisfy me that it was not St Evelyn himself in his own coat who visited the chemist."

As he spoke the General had taken the Inverness in his hands, and was turning it over curiously.

"I wish it could tell us who wore it last," he said, thoughtfully; "for that last, you may depend upon it, was at Cleobury. Has it ever been overhauled? People have been known before now to leave things in their pockets."

"Hardly when on such a job as buying arsenic in disguise. And I fancy—I am certain, I think—that the coat was thoroughly examined when we first got hold of it. It ought to have been."

"Who searched it?—you or one of your subordinates, Captain Bracebridge?" said the General, who by this time was fumbling in the many pockets of the Inverness. "Whoever it was, he missed this."

The General pulled out a glove, a red dog-skin glove, and both inspected it with deep interest.

"One of the Colonel's, I suppose," said Cap-

tain Bracebridge. "There is nothing strange in finding it here."

"Not a bit of it. Trust a man with a house full of daughters to know a woman's glove. See inside here, the number—6¾. Look at it for yourself."

"A woman's glove? By George! you're right. Is there anything more? Allow me," and the chief constable took the coat from General Wyndham-Parker's hands. To get a better light he moved towards the window, which was close by the door communicating with the outer office.

"I see nothing more," he said. "One or two scraps of paper only, part of a torn letter. A man's writing; I should think Colonel St Evelyn's. Do you know his hand, General?"

"I couldn't swear to it. But you ought to be able to compare it by-and-by. Take care of the pieces. Is that all?"

"All in the pockets, yes. But see here, this is rather curious."

Captain Bracebridge had been fingering the

coat, and had passed his hand along the collar on the inner side. He now held up to the light one long hair.

"What is that? Horse-hair?" asked the General.

"It is too fine for that. And it is not the Colonel's; too long, he was always close-cropped. It is a woman's hair, General; evidence, corroborating the glove, that a woman wore this coat last."

"What a surprising thing! It must be so, Bracebridge. But what woman?"

"I think I can form an idea. A woman who has been cropping up constantly of late, and who is becoming more and more implicated in the Straddlethorpe murder."

"God bless me! you take my breath away. What woman? What is her name?"

"She was housekeeper at the Hall, and went by the name of Mrs Leleu. We have had our eye upon her lately, and now I think there is enough to run her in, if only we can find her."

"I am fairly taken aback. I don't know what to make of it all," said the General, reluctant to part with long-cherished convictions. "This changes the whole complexion of the case."

"You'll have to confess you misjudged the Colonel. But I take it this means more than the arrest of the real murderer; it is likely to affect the ownership of the Hall."

"Do you mean to say that young Lezaire is mixed up in the business? Never!" cried the General, aghast.

"I shouldn't like to say so much as that, seeing that he is a friend of yours. Besides which, he is out there"—Captain Bracebridge pointed with his thumb to the outer office—"and I shouldn't like him to overhear. Are you going with him to Londonderry?"

The General did not know how to answer; he was unhappy, very unhappy in his mind. His evil fortune—or more exactly his blind cupidity, although he wouldn't admit so much—had involved him deeply in relations which

might bring him discredit, disgrace, perhaps even a ruinous loss.

"You had better keep what I have told you to yourself. But especially no word to him."

"Perhaps we ought to go back to him," said the General, "although for the life of me I don't know what to say now or do."

Sir Hubert Lezaire was no longer in the outer office.

"Tired of waiting, I suppose he has taken himself off," said Captain Bracebridge. "But I will just inquire."

A constable answered the summons.

"The gentleman who was here, sir, drove away in his brougham more than ten minutes ago."

"Left no message? Was he alone?"

"No, sir. There was a lady in the carriage while it waited."

"What lady?" cried the General. "You must be mistaken."

"Could it have been Mrs Leleu?"

"That was the lady's name, I think. In-

spector Earswick saw her too, and I believe went after the brougham."

"That was smart of him. He will run them down," said Captain Bracebridge, with much satisfaction, "and we shall know where to find her when she is wanted, which, I take it, will be before long. Can I be of any further use to you, General?"

"I cannot quite say." The little General was growing more and more bewildered. "I am so taken aback by all this. Only I beg of you to keep me informed of all that goes on. It will be serious—more than serious—if I have allowed myself to be compromised by this young scapegrace, as I greatly fear he is."

General Wyndham-Parker returned to Hazelgrove that night a broken-down, dispirited man. Having communicated the last news about Etta to his wife, he proceeded, with the injustice often displayed by the stronger sex, to visit the whole blame on Mrs Wyndham-Parker.

"It was all your doing," he repeated. "Why did you persuade me to take the fellow up?"

"You know, Wilfrid, you asked him here yourself. I shouldn't have thought of it."

"You thought he would do for Ica, and you encouraged his attentions to Etta, although I strongly disapproved. Throwing our girls at his head, and making a laughing-stock of ourselves in the county."

"Why, do you think people know about Etta?"

"Know! Every one knows."

"And people are talking about us? Dear, dear, how distressing! What do they say?"

"Nothing to me, of course. But old Etherly was chuckling over it at the club—I am sure he was; and Lord Prudhames, who was never too friendly, would not look at me in the street to-day."

"We shall never be able to hold our heads up—to look people in the face. That wicked, wicked girl!"

"That's not the worst. At least, she's off our hands."

"You think they're married, then?"

"We may be sure of that—or they mean to be—as she was with Mrs St Evelyn. But I tell you there is far worse behind."

And the General went on to speak of the suspicions against Sir Hubert, and of the bill transaction, with the awful responsibilities it would entail if the Lezaire property ever went back to the other branch.

"We shall be ruined—utterly," said little Wyndham-Parker, with something like a sob. "I can never pay. He'll make me a bankrupt, that villanous Jew! I must give up my clubs. We shall have to emigrate, or I must sweep a crossing. God knows what——"

Meanwhile, full of the new anxieties caused by what he had overheard—for he had listened at the keyhole to all the chief constable's talk—Sir Hubert had gone back to Mrs Leleu in the carriage.

"We must separate; you are in danger. Where would you like to go?" he asked her hurriedly, as, bidding the coachman drive

back to the station, he took his seat beside her.

"To Straddlethorpe," she replied, very coolly, as soon as she had heard all that Sir Hubert had to tell her.

"That you won't. What should I do? I won't be dragged into trouble."

"You won't, eh? You'll do just as I tell you, and just as I choose. I'm going to Straddlethorpe to stay. You must hide me there for as long as I want, or until I hear from Jacob, d'ye see?"

"But if they come after you? They will—they may be following now."

"I hope they are—the whole lot of the Thorpeshire police. I know them: if they're like that Earswick, they'll be easily fooled."

Earswick at this moment was behind in a Market Reepham fly, chasing the brougham. He followed it, always at a respectful distance, first to the Market Reepham station, where a porter put a good-sized travelling-bag on the

driving-seat by the coachman, then on again by the highroad straight to the lodge-gates of Straddlethorpe Hall. As it was now dark, he promptly climbed the park railings, and running across the grass, forestalled the brougham, which had taken the more circuitous carriage-drive. From a safe place of concealment in the shrubbery, he saw Sir Hubert alight and hand out his female companion. Both then entered the house.

"Gone to ground. Now I must stop the earths. Some of my friends in the servants' hall will keep me informed of her movements."

Through the watch thus established, Earswick heard regularly of Mrs Leleu; that she had again taken up her quarters at the Hall, but seemingly as a guest, not in any menial capacity. She was supposed to be ill, kept her room — or more exactly rooms, for a snug suite had been put at her disposal—and here she had her meals and spent all her time.

Several days passed, and then the moment

for further action arrived. The chief constable felt justified in asking for a warrant to arrest Mrs Leleu.

He had written a long letter to Mr Tinson for his and Lady Lezaire's information, giving an account of the discovery made in the Inverness. At the same time he forwarded the scraps of paper found in the pocket, with the female glove, and asked if the handwriting could be identified. Was it Colonel St Evelyn's, or whose?

Lady Lezaire spoke without hesitation. The writing was either Sir Percy's, or an extraordinarily clever imitation. In either case the fact was strange, not to say suspicious.

Mr Tinson sought the advice of the Treasury Solicitor, who in turn consulted the Public Prosecutor. It was decided to lay hands at once on Mrs Leleu; and Earswick, with another policeman, went to make the arrest.

The bird was flown.

Sir Hubert Lezaire at first clumsily denied,

then was forced to admit, that she had been very recently at the Hall,—an old servant, he explained, to whom he was glad to give a home while seeking a new place.

Earswick very properly refused to accept any but his own evidence of her departure, and made a minute but fruitless search of the whole house.

CHAPTER LXII.

AUNT CORCKRAN'S.

It was the late autumn, the fall of the leaf and of the year, when the St Evelyns settled in their new home. They were greeted by that glorious season known as the Indian summer, a brief spell of magnificent weather that comes late, and with strange fleeting sunshine preludes the long stern winter close at hand. Under a cloudless sky the autumn landscape glowed with all the gorgeous colour peculiar to the land; the dying leafage blazed with brightness; the strongest colours, passing from cadmium to blood-red, contrasted often with vivid green, sparkled in the sunlight. Late flowers bedecked the undergrowth and jewelled

the mossy ground, while clusters of crimson berries hung on many a bush. The stems of the trees were of varied tint and form; snow-white birch stood near noble straight-limbed hemlocks, graceful black spruce-fir, and lofty primeval pine.

There was a little settlement at the Nom de Dieu mines: the shanty-residences of the miners, with the stores to administer to their needs. The forest had been cleared for half a mile around, and at the edge of the clearing stood the St Evelyns' house, frame-built—of wooden boarding, that is to say: an unpicturesque but not uncomfortable dwelling, of royal dimensions, as Rachel thought, after the narrow lodging at Harrop's Green.

It was a rough-and-ready life rather; they were on the far verge of civilisation, if not beyond it. The nearest town was eight or ten miles distant by the road, but ere long the distance would be shortened by half when winter froze the harbour hard, and a direct track, marked out by fir-boughs, was made

across the snow-covered ice. Supplies had to be laid in against the winter, the house victualled with flour, and salt pork, and groceries, and tinned or canned meats innumerable. All this Rachel saw to herself, advised and assisted by the "helps" she found in the settlement: a Scotch miner's German wife, a comely comfortable Frau, and a slatternly Irish girl, one of a numerous brood, crowded out, and glad to take service away from home.

While Rachel prepared for the long winter, and busied herself with the ordering of her primitive establishment, the Colonel threw himself heart and soul into his new work, gathering up into his strong hands the whole system of administration, taking command of every one and everything in that matter-of-course, not-to-be-denied fashion that is only gained by military training. He was wise enough to make no changes till he had mastered the whole of the details of working; then, by rearranging the labour shifts, and exacting more punctual attendances, he ob-

tained better results from the miners with less demands on their time. One of the gangers tried a fall with him, but was badly beaten; while the clerk in the office found himself summarily dismissed after an unsuccessful attempt to play fast and loose with the figures.

Thus busily and pleasantly occupied, a month slipped by almost unnoted by either St Evelyn or his wife. They had hardly time even to wonder what Gibbings was doing, and why he had made no sign beyond sending one of the addressed envelopes with which they had provided him. It bore the postmark "River Inhabitants," so they were certain he had reached the place to which Podifat was also pointing. Beyond that they knew nothing, but were content to wait patiently, and almost without anxiety, feeling sure that he could be trusted to report progress in due time.

The reader shall now hear how Gibbings fared.

He made the journey by rail to Pictou, a port on the north Nova Scotian coast, and

halted there a day or two without coming upon any traces of Podifat. But, taking the local steamer to Port Hawksbury, he found his man on board. He was able to watch him during the voyage, avoiding recognition till they landed at the wharf, when Podifat came upon him suddenly.

"Holloa, mate! where have I seen you before?" he said, eyeing Gibbings suspiciously as they stood together in front of the stage office.

"On board the Apollo," answered Gibbings boldly, thinking this confession safer than any denial.

"What are you doing in these parts? Do you belong down here? Seafaring? Or a longshore sailor?"

"I was cast away last voyage, picked up, and landed in England. I was in a coal brig from Sydney, Cape Breton, and I'm making my way back there to squeeze something out of the owners, or get a new berth."

"You'd better be smart, then. It's getting

late to ship. Why, the ice may come down next month and shut up all the traffic."

"I don't know what I'll do then. I'd better have stayed in Halifax, perhaps, or even in Pictou. But I'm bound to try for a job. Anything doing round about here?"

"Can't say. Haven't been this way for twenty years or more. Are you going by the stage? Yes? Come in and liquor, then. A drain o' white-eye 'll do yer no harm."

Gibbings accepted the invitation, then stood drink in his turn, and liberally repeated the process after the stage started, till Podifat was half-seas over, and pretty well incapable when the settlement of River Inhabitants was reached.

"You booked for here, old hoss," said the driver, "so I must put yer down. But don't get lying on the track or staying out all night. Here, some of you boys," he went on, addressing the loafers who hung round the stage, "help him up to Aunt Corckran's; he'll get board and lodging there."

"I guess I'll get down here too," said Gibbings, promptly. "I don't care to go any farther to-night. So show the way, lads, and I'll give ye a hand with this chap."

Corckran's boarding-house, kept by a mulatto woman, and called after her, was a mere shanty, with only two rooms besides the bar. Podifat was laid in one of these upon a heap of newly cut spruce-fir boughs; while Gibbings, having despatched some fried pork and eggs, found a similar bed in another corner.

Next morning early, and long before the fumes of drink had evaporated from Podifat's brain, Gibbings started forth in search of work, which he meant to take as a colourable pretext for remaining in the settlement. He found it at a farmhouse, a mile out, where they wanted a man to tend the ox-team and make himself useful about the place. Labour was not too plentiful, and a likely-looking fellow, even of Gibbings's age, who could turn his hand to anything, was worth board and lodging and a dollar or so a-day.

Several days elapsed before he heard anything more of Podifat. Even then it was mere gossip, the talk of the farm kitchen, brought in by one of the sons of the house who had been into the settlement,—something about a new arrival, an old fellow who was having a tall time, perpetually on the "scoop," standing treat to all hands at Aunt Corckran's, and keeping it up till all was blue.

"Who is he?" asked the father. "What brings him this way?"

"He's come here for sport. He was talking with old Wagahuacook, the Indian hunter, about moose-calling after the first snow, promising to go out to his camp on the edge of the Barrens next week, and taking his chance of a black bear before they hide for the winter. He's got an A1 rifle, which he showed all round, and talked as if he could use it. I think he knew his way about. No stranger would want a pair of moose-shank moccasins, or be so spry about getting a good buffalo robe."

"Did you hear his name, Angus, or what he calls hisself?"

"Podifat, I think. Aunt Corckran seemed to know something of him and his forebears."

"I mind some Podifats in the settlement years agone, and a precious bad lot they were. I'd say this was one of them, although they all went to the bad, as I believe."

Gibbings did not like to ask more just then, but he carefully treasured up in his own mind what he had heard, and promised himself to inquire further from Mrs Corckran the first time he got the chance.

A week passed, and then another, before Gibbings had any such opportunity. He heard, however, from time to time of Podifat, who led a life of debauchery, alternating with spells in the woods after big game. It was during one of these absences that Gibbings visited the settlement, and halting his team near Aunt Corckran's boarding-house, went in for a glass and the chance of a chat.

The dark-skinned landlady, an aged but still hale and hearty woman, was alone in her bar, and Gibbings, sipping his whisky, soon asked for Mr Podifat.

"He's out—in the woods, after caliboo. You want him? Many folks want him. Some one —very nice little gentleman—was asking for him just now."

"Don't you remember me, Auntie? I came with him that first night by the stage, and I slept here too."

"Was that you, sah? I no remember well. But how long you know him, sah? You know his sister, sah? Very mean pusson that, sah."

"Where is she now, Auntie?"

"Can't say, sah; me have no dealings with such trash. Very bad woman. Go away to Halifax, sah, years and years ago."

"By herself? In service? Got married? What?"

"Got big thumping boy, sah; so they told Auntie. But why you ask so many questions —you the father of that boy?"

"'Tisn't likely, Auntie. I'd have no call to ask questions then. Only I heard she was married in Halifax."

"I don't admit that's true, sah. But I heard of her 'nother time in service at Louisville, down by Sydney mines."

"All this is worth hearing," thought Gibbings to himself, wondering how he might manage to hear more. But the team was waiting, and Mrs Corckran seemed disinclined for further talk. So he took himself off, intending to visit the settlement again.

As he left the bar a man came in fairly well dressed, wearing a big overcoat with a fur collar, and what is locally termed a stovepipe hat. He might have been some land agent's clerk from the city, or a Yankee speculator prospecting for petroleum. But Gibbings paid him no special attention beyond giving him "good day."

He did not see that the new-comer started at the sound of his voice, or hear him ask Mrs Corckran abruptly—

"Who's that?"

"Don't know zackly, sah. A teamster working out to Sandy M'Anespey's farm about a mile away. But your friend Mr Podifat will tell you. They travelled here together a fortnight or more ago."

"Were he and Podifat good friends? Did they see one another often?"

"Reckon they didn't much. Anyway, this chap's hungering to see him now, wondering when he'd be back from the woods; pretending he knew him and his family and sister—all lies."

"Podifat's sister! What did he say he knew about her?"

"Nary word. Thought she was married in Halifax. But I knew better than that, and told him so. He was only asking foolish questions. Think he wanted to make me mad."

"Can I lodge here till Mr Podifat comes back? What do you charge for board?"

"Four dollars a-week, sah. Make you very comfortable. You like to stay?"

"I'm on. I'll just step down to the stage office for my bag and be back before dark."

"Very glad to see you, sah. Perhaps Mr Podifat come home by then."

CHAPTER LXIII.

WHAT THE PARSON WROTE.

Some days elapsed before Gibbings paid a second visit to the settlement. This time he went without his team, on a simple message about some winter fuel. His business despatched, he went on, as a matter of course, to Mrs Corckran's.

The bar was well attended that day. A number of sycophantic loafers stood around, sucking up freely all that Mrs Corckran served out — whisky, and white-eye, and fine old Jamaica rum. It was all paid for, she said, and Gibbings at once knew by whom. There was old Podifat, a little more drunk than usual, leaning on the bar counter, talking about his

prowess with the gun, and his unlimited supply of funds.

Gibbings took his place amongst the rest, meaning to await events. It was imprudent to talk further with Aunt Corckran just then, but he might get speech with her later, or perhaps with Podifat himself.

In the middle of it all a man rushed out from an inner room, went straight to Podifat, and took him roughly by the arm.

"Here, Jacob, you sot! drop all this. What call have you to stand treat?"

The voice was so familiar to Gibbings, that he bent his eyes eagerly on the new-comer. It was the same man that he had met at the door of the shanty a few days previously, but without the fur coat and tall hat. The face was plainly visible, and in spite of the small black moustache and the now closely cropped black hair, he had no difficulty in recognising Mrs Leleu.

Their eyes met. Did she know him too? He still wore his wig and beard, and hoped she

did not penetrate his disguise. In any case, there was no need for remaining there—it was neither natural nor prudent. Besides, this was news that should be sent at once to Colonel St Evelyn.

Swallowing his glass, at Podifat's expense, he went straight out of the shanty and into the settlement.

He was revolving in his mind now how he could best and most safely communicate with the Colonel. As we know, his scholarship was limited; and whom could he trust in a strange place to write a letter for him on such an urgent yet strictly confidential matter?

To whom should he apply? The police? Where was he to find a constable in this sparsely settled country? and could the nearest representative of the law be trusted when found?

A parson? Ah! that was a better idea. But there was none in the township—no church of any persuasion, so far as he knew, within miles.

He went to the post-office in the general store, just where the stages stopped, and asked for a clergyman.

"What for? To tie you up? Won't the registrar do? Or, if it's a christening, leave it alone. As to burying, any one can do that. We've no use for a parson here. You must try across to Canso, t'other side of the Gut."

"Who shall I ask for, and how am I to get across?"

"Parson Lawford — that's the name. Go down to the beach; some one'll put you across in their whale-boat if you'll plank down a dollar."

The narrow seaway that divides the island of Cape Breton from the Nova Scotia mainland is known as the Gut or Straits of Canso: it was barely a couple of miles wide at this point, and the shore was not many hundred yards from the settlement.

Gibbings found a boat without difficulty, and was soon ferried over.

"Will you be long?" asked the fisherman

who had piloted him, a hybrid creature in homespun, half backwoodsman, half sea-dog.

"I'm going up as far as the clergyman's, if you know where that is——"

"Up there: the red-and-white frame-house above the church."

"I can get there, do all I have to do, and be back inside of an hour," said Gibbings.

"Make it that, stranger, and I'll wait; but not a minute more. It's easy crossing now, but the tide's making fast, the wind's agin us, and the race'll soon run seven or eight knots. Nothing less than a screw-steamer could put you back then."

Gibbings promised to return within the time, but, as we shall see, was not so good as his word.

Scaling a rather steep track he entered a pine-wood, through which a path led to the minister's house. Asking and obtaining an interview, he proceeded to business at once.

The Rev. Mr Lawford was a plain man, plain even to uncouthness—roughly, nay, shabbily dressed in a faded rusty black homespun

coat, and trousers stuffed into long boots. He had an honest face, set in a fringe of stubbly iron-grey hair, and spoke with a marked colonial accent or "burr."

"Want me to write a letter for you? I have no objection. You are a distressed seaman, I suppose—British or colonial?"

"Neither, sir. I will tell you exactly, if you will first take down what I've got to say."

"Go on, then."

"Honoured sir," began Gibbings, dictating, "I write, as was agreed between us and your good lady, my respects to her and the family, and to tell you what I have been at since I sent you the first envelope. Well, sir, I tracked down that chap to his own home hard by here. They remembered him well as a bad lot, likewise his sister, who is now with him. I could take my oath of this, although she is not the same quite as when we knew her. She is that Mrs Leleu, and no one else. But her real name is Podifat, or was—leastways it must be if she's Podifat's sister, as I am prepared to

swear. They are together now, in the settlement of River Inhabitants; but she is in different clothes, disguised as a man.

"Well, sir, that is not all. They tell me she had a son, but I can't hear who the father was. If it wasn't that we know he had another mother, I'd say it was this very Sir Hubert Lezaire. Of course, as I understand, Sir Hubert's mother was called Spary, and she is dead."

"What's all this you're asking me to write?" interrupted the clergyman. "And what are you doing in these parts? Are you a detective officer?"

"Oh no; not a regular detec., sir. But it's got to do with the great Lezaire case, of which you may have heard."

"Yes, something. There were inquiries here a year or two ago about some people connected with it."

"The last baronet, Sir Percy, ran off with a girl from hereabouts, who was the mother of the present baronet,—Spary, she was called."

"I know the name of Spary well: it was that of the previous incumbent here. But they're all dead, and that's what I told the agents who were inquiring. One of the girls had gone off —that was perfectly well remembered, but not the name of the man who took her away."

"It was Sir Percy Lezaire."

"So it was thought, I remember now, and believed. But that was not the name, nor was he, as I have since learnt, the person. The man who eloped with Priscilla Spary was called Lehague. He came from Cape Breton, and they went back there."

"Then they couldn't have been Sir Hubert's parents. Who were they?"

"Why, Sir Percy of course was one, or how could Hubert be baronet now? There must be some mistake about the mother, that's all. Probably it is this woman Podifat I have written about for you."

"Then she would be Lady Lezaire, and she isn't. Trust her to claim it if she was entitled. But I am getting mixed. The matter wants

better brains than mine to clear it up. Perhaps, sir, you wouldn't mind putting down what you have just said, all in your own words. The Colonel will understand better than if I told him."

Mr Lawford wrote down a brief summary of the facts, which he read to Gibbings.

"Is there anything more?" he then asked.

"Only say that I will follow as fast as I can travel. There isn't much more for me to do here, and I'm pining to rejoin the Colonel and serve again alongside and under him."

The letter completed, Gibbings produced a second envelope with which Mrs St Evelyn had supplied him, saying—

"Sign, sir, in my name: William Gibbings. Then put it in this, which is all ready for the post. Will you read the address, sir, and make a note of it, for I'm sure my master and missus would like to see you and thank you if at any time you pass that way."

All this had occupied but half an hour, and Gibbings started back for the shore fully satis-

fied that he would find his boat and boatman still there.

But during his absence, two other persons who had also crossed the Straits and landed higher up, came down through the fir-woods to where the fisherman was waiting.

"Are you the hoss that ferried a chap over half an hour ago from River Inhabitants?" asked one, who was no other than Podifat.

"Yes, sirree. Do you want a passage back?" was the answer.

"No; no more does he. He sent us to tell you, you needn't wait," said Podifat's companion. "We were to pay you what he promised."

"One dollar. Hand it over then, quick, and I'll up stick and be off. The stream's getting stronger every second."

The money was paid, the fisherman ran up his big sail, and was soon far out in the stream on his homeward voyage.

"Now, Jacob," said Podifat's companion as they walked quickly up the bank and into

the wood, "there's no one to interfere with us, and we can fix this job our own way. I mean to know whether it's Gibbings or his ghost."

"What odds? What harm's he doing?"

"If it's him he's come after us, and must have found out more than he ought to know. The game's getting desperate, and we must play close."

"You wouldn't lay hands on him?"

"That will depend. Let's watch him well; I shall know him, or I'm a bigger fool than I think. Hush! stand back—here he comes."

They withdrew in among the tree-stems, and were quite hidden from view as Gibbings, fearing no evil, hurried along the forest path, making for the boat he had left on the shore below. He passed quite close to where they watched, crushed against the very tree that sheltered them, and was riddled, so to speak, through and through by two pair of shrewdly penetrating eyes.

"Gibbings! I could swear to him," hissed

one in a hoarse whisper into the ear of the other. "After him! Give it him—on the head! Now!"

Next instant Gibbings lay stretched senseless on the fir-needles that carpeted the path. As he fell his wig was disarranged and his beard went all away.

"I thought as much. He has hunted us close. But the scent is overrun now."

"What shall we do with him? Finish him? 'Tisn't safe, Priss."

"Let's see first what he's got on him."

And with a few dexterous twists of the hand, the woman—the reader will have guessed before this that it was Mrs Leleu—turned out the pockets of the prostrate Gibbings, and became possessed of all they contained.

The chief prize was the letter addressed to Colonel St Evelyn, which had but just been indited, and which gave this precious couple all the information they required.

"This settles his hash," said Mrs Leleu grimly, with a fell murderous look in her eyes.

"Here, Jacob, take him by the head; I'll help with his heels. Now, straight on to the beach. He shall be found drowned, if he's picked up at all; but this strong current ought to sweep him out into the Atlantic. If he is found, it will be said he was drunk and fell into the sea."

One! two! three! The body was swung backwards and forwards to get impetus, and then flung out into the fast-flowing eddying tide.

"He's silenced and done for," said Mrs Leleu. "But he brought it all on himself. Cursed idiot! why did he meddle with our affairs? Come on, Jacob; we must clear out of here. Let's get back to our boat and cross as quick as we can."

"It's a bad job, Priss. They might bring it home to us, and it 'd put the rope round our necks. You won't stay on at River Inhabitants after this?"

"That's as may be. I'm half inclined to go on where this letter's addressed. Anyway, we'll send it ahead of us."

"Never, Priss. You wouldn't let them learn all that's written there."

"D'ye take me for a fool? I'll tell them something quite different to that—something that will explain the disappearance of that fool there," and Mrs Leleu pointed darkly to the streaming tide.

CHAPTER LXIV.

WHAT THE OTHERS READ.

The racing swirling waters had sucked in the body consigned to them, and it was lost to sight for the few seconds that Podifat and Mrs Leleu continued to watch it. But contact with the icy-cold water acted with immediately reviving effect, and with returning consciousness revived the strongest of all human instincts, self-preservation. Intuitively, almost automatically, Gibbings began to battle with the hostile element; and then, as he gained a more accurate idea of what had happened to him, he struck out manfully, with the desperate determination indeed of a man fighting for his life.

Although the current had at first swept him out some distance from the shore, the direction of the stream soon changed, and while still bearing him rapidly onwards, helped him in his efforts to regain the land.

Gibbings was fortunately a good swimmer, and he made a stout fight for his life. He deserved to save it, and he did; but it was a very bedraggled, disconsolate, much-wearied figure that emerged from the sea, a mile or more beyond Canso and near the mouth of the Gut.

What was he to do next? Still dazed with the blow he had received, benumbed with cold as he shivered in his dripping wet clothes, it was difficult for him to realise exactly what had occurred—whether he had fallen or been struck down. He looked around; a long reach of bleak coast lay in front, behind were dense pine-woods coming down to the water's edge. He must do something at once: the only chance for him was in brisk movement; that only could restore warmth and circulation. Should

he go forward, or back? It was best surely to remain in the open country than plunge into the forest.

So he followed the coast, hoping to find help—to come sooner or later upon a farm or log-hut; perhaps he might meet with a fishing-boat that would give him a passage to the next settlement or town.

His wits became keener as animation returned. He began to remember all that had happened just before he had been nearly drowned. Almost instinctively, he felt for the letter which had been written for him—was it safe?

It was gone. Everything was gone — his pockets were absolutely empty. He had been robbed, he might have been murdered; and the disappearance of the letter told him exactly why.

"Those Podifats, of course. But I'll be even with them yet, if only I can get out of my present plight. And I'm not starved outright, or frozen to death," he said, setting his teeth, as he pushed on with renewed vigour.

The way was long and lonely. Not a sign of human habitation for miles and miles of weary, hopeless, aimless walking over rough and varied country: now wide tracks of stony rocky waste, now strips of slushy swamp and forest-marsh encumbered with fallen trees.

All at once, turning a headland, he came upon an open bay—it was Chedabuctoo Bay—and saw a small fleet of fishing-boats—small smart craft, as taut and pretty as pleasure-yachts—lying at anchor close inshore.

A dingy belonging to one of them was pulled up on the beach, and a couple of fishermen who had landed in search of water were loading up with freshly filled kegs.

"Holloa, stranger!" said one, accosting Gibbings roughly—"where have you dropped from?"

"Canso," he explained. "Cast away, and half drowned into the bargain. Can you take me aboard? I want a passage—anywhere."

The request was not received cordially.

"Who are you? You don't belong to these parts, sure-ly? Can you pay?"

"I've lost everything. But I've good friends in Sydney, or Halifax. You shan't lose."

The fishermen conferred together, still hesitating. But in the end they agreed to take Gibbings on board their schooner, "The Pride of Arichat," destination still unknown.

"If the take is good we may run round to Halifax: then we'll land you there. If not, we shall fetch Arichat before Sunday, and you can find your way on as you kinder please."

The fishermen were in luck, and so was Gibbings. They had caught their cargo of live mackerel and had put him ashore at Halifax within forty-eight hours.

A call upon Captain Sutton sufficed to refit Gibbings, and start him on a more prosperous journey, this time by steamer direct to Sydney, which he reached in less than a week from the day of his disagreeable adventure in Canso Straits.

Strange to say, and for the first time since

their acquaintance, he was not very cordially received by Colonel St Evelyn on his arrival at the Nom de Dieu mines.

"What have you been up to, man? How is it I have heard nothing of you all these weeks? I thought better of you," said the Colonel, sternly.

"I don't quite understand you, sir," said Gibbings, drawing himself up, closing his heels, and standing at attention, in the attitude of a soldier being rebuked by a superior. "I've had a narrow squeak for it, but I don't know as how I've done anything wrong."

"Wrong! And you on special service, so to speak! But it's always the way with you old soldiers. Directly you're on your own resources you take to drink."

"Drink, Colonel? What! in this belated country? Why, the liquor's only fit for pigs."

"Yes, and you're one of them. I've heard all about you. Drunk all about the place, like any disreputable defaulter."

"How did you hear, sir? Who told you?"

"Why, the clergyman of Canso wrote me word. It seems an envelope addressed to me was found in your pocket in one of your drunken frolics, and he thought it right I should know. I will read what he says, if you like."

"Thank you, sir," said Gibbings, smiling. "I'd like to know what the clergyman said."

"He says: 'Presuming that you take an interest in the man in whose pocket this envelope was found, I write to inform you that he has taken to evil courses, and gone altogether to the bad. He is constantly drunk, and in his cups talks very freely about your affairs. He says he was sent here by you to make some inquiries, but I can hardly believe you would intrust him with any delicate or important business. It is my belief that, unless he is got away from here soon, he will come to a bad end.' There, what have you got to say to that charge?"

"To think that you couldn't trust me better

than that, Colonel!" began Gibbings reproachfully, but then he laughed outright. "That letter's all a hoax, written on purpose to deceive you—not by the clergyman, but instead of the one he wrote for me, and which I put inside."

"God bless me! What does it all mean?" Gibbings now told in detail all that had been written in the letter at Canso, and all that had happened to him. "I see it plainly now. She sticks at nothing, this woman, and this substituted letter was cleverly intended to explain your disappearance. But come and see my wife; we must tell her all about it."

Mrs St Evelyn, gentle soul, had declined to be present when the Colonel reprimanded Gibbings, and it was with intense relief that she heard how completely the faithful old servant had exonerated himself.

"There is much food for thought in all this news you bring, Gibbings," she presently observed; "and the most curious part of it all is what the Canso clergyman says about Priscilla

Spary—that she went off with a man named Lehague, not my father."

"Sir Percy might have passed under a false name," put in the Colonel.

"No, sir," Gibbings corrected him, as the best informed; "for the parson particularly said the man was known to be Lehague, and that he came from Cape Breton."

"What part of Cape Breton, I wonder?" asked Mrs St Evelyn. "If we knew that we might hear more of him."

"Possibly Louisville," said the Colonel. "The marriage took place there, we know. He may have gone straight back to his own home."

"Let us go over to Louisville, Colonel," suggested Gibbings, "and see if any such man is remembered there. It is not so many years ago."

"We must know, of course," said Mrs St Evelyn, "that there was such a person as this Lehague. Until we are certain that he, and not my father, married Priscilla Spary, Hubert's parentage cannot be settled."

"But if Hubert is not Priscilla Spary's child, whose is he?" asked the Colonel.

"That's what I said to the parson at Canso," added Gibbings. "I believe in my own heart he is Mrs Leleu's child."

"What! Can you mean that my father married that woman? Impossible!"

"I don't see my way clearly, I confess," said the Colonel. "It's a puzzle. Hubert must either be your father's legitimate son, which would mean that Sir Percy married his mother—or he has no right to his present title. Now Sir Percy, we are told—but this has still to be proved—did not marry Priscilla Spary. Who was really his wife? Not this woman Podifat: that's out of the question."

"Of course, or she would have been recognised when the succession was changed, and would now be Lady Lezaire."

"There is a big fraud somewhere, that is quite evident; and we are not far off the clue. The attempt made by these miscreants on Gibbings proved that. I should like to get over to

Louisville soon, within the next week or two. I doubt if I can leave the mines before that."

"I could go first, sir, if you thought as how there was no time to lose," suggested Gibbings.

"No, no; you shall run no more risks alone. They are desperate people, and there is no knowing their next move. You shall stop here and recruit yourself a bit, and we will pay a visit to Louisville before the end of the month."

A few days later letters from England and Lady Lezaire brought a full account of all that had happened at Market Reepham and Straddlethorpe; the further and closer inspection of the Inverness and what it had revealed; the projected arrest of Mrs Leleu, and her disappearance.

Lady Lezaire commented at length upon the pieces of writing found in the coat-pocket.

"It was your dear father's hand"—the letter was to Mrs St Evelyn—"at least so I thought at first sight. It was, and yet it was not; and it was so unlikely that he would be writing about such things as these scraps dealt with. There was a lot of repetition, the name of Podi-

fat constantly repeated. . . . 'My dearest boy, . . . he shall be heir. . . . I will do it, by hook or crook;' . . . and more of the same sort. Now, if your father wrote that, how did it come in the pockets of the Colonel's coat? All this made Mr Tinson suspicious, and we both examined the writing over and over again; then we compared it with other writing, and at last, on Mr Tinson's suggestion, with the papers found in my husband's desk upon which the ejectment suit turned. If the scraps were in a forged hand, so was the confession, the writing was so much alike in both; and for the first time Mr Tinson began to think that he and every one else had been misled. There had been a gross deception somewhere — a felony, a great crime, committed by some one, and little doubt that that some one was the woman Leleu."

"We are beginning to see daylight at last," said the Colonel. "I haven't a doubt now that Hubert is Mrs Leleu's son. She wrote those lies."

"And lots of other lies, I expect. She's very handy with her pen. Of course she forged that letter purporting to be from the Canso clergyman," said Gibbings.

"We have no proof of that," said Mrs St Evelyn, "except that it is not the letter you dictated. However, it is easily settled. Write a civil letter, Ferdinand, to the Canso clergyman, and ask him what he thinks of it all."

"It's a small matter, except in proof of the bigger forgeries. How cleverly it was all planned! Of course it was her precious brat she wished to make heir by hook or crook. More than that, she removed the last obstacle, poor Carysfort, and cleverly helped to throw the blame on me. She must not be allowed to escape us now."

"What an awful woman!" said Mrs St Evelyn. "No one is safe while she is at large."

"We must help the police to lay hands on her," said Gibbings. "I don't doubt she will easily be found."

"I will go to Sydney at once and cable home.

The police ought to know that she is on this side of the water."

The sleigh was ordered out, and the Colonel drove his smart pair of long-haired cobs, gay with streamers and merry jingling bells, over the deep snow-covered track into the capital or chief town of Cape Breton. He drove straight to the post-office, despatched his message to Captain Bracebridge as follows: "Leleu here—St Evelyn," saw it sent off, and, satisfied that he had not been watched, went on to the Bras d'Or Hotel.

A little knot of loafers were sitting round the great stove in the bar as the Colonel came in. Some of them gave him good-day, others asked him what he had would take; but he passed on without pausing into the dining-room, taking little notice of any.

But when he was gone, two men, who had been sitting with the rest, got up and left the hotel. They were old Podifat and his now inseparable companion, Mrs Leleu.

CHAPTER LXV.

LOUISVILLE.

The little town of Louisville was not often honoured with visitors. It did not own a hotel, although in more prosperous times there had been two or three. But now the postmaster was glad enough to board anybody whom business brought to the town, and they were few and far between. In the winter business was altogether at a standstill, and Mr Jerram, the functionary aforesaid, would have been quite taken aback at the descent made upon his house if St Evelyn's party had not brought their guns, their game-bags, and their decoy-geese, which showed the kind of sport they were after. There were three of them : the Colonel himself,

Captain Sutton—who with his wife had just arrived at the mines—and of course Gibbings.

Naturally the first talk was about the wild geese, which were daily expected in their usual migratory flight southward, the best places for watching their movements, and the number of hands that would be needed to build the snow-shelters in which the sportsmen waited for their game.

Mr Jerram had the fluency of a lonely man whose tongue was seldom untied in genial conversation. He told them all he knew about wild geese and wild animals generally—a wide subject, over which he ranged boldly but with no great accuracy. Then he passed to colonial topics—a subject of undying interest—and he denounced all who disagreed with him in vigorous language, including the lieutenant-governor, whom he declared should be impeached.

He had talked for an hour and more before St Evelyn was able to bring the conversation to more interesting matter. But at last he put the question whether Mr Jerram had ever

known any people of the name of Lehague in Louisville.

"No, sir, I never did. There have been no such people here this twenty year—not since I settled in the town."

This was disappointing.

"Perhaps there are older inhabitants who may have known them. I am rather anxious to find out all I can."

"Is it curiosity, sir, or a matter of business? Maybe they were relations of yours; you are looking for money from them. Don't count on them. Anyway, they didn't make money here in Louisville: no one does; I don't, not in any line, and I try many."

"You sell pretty well everything, I see," said Sutton laughing, as he looked round the store in which they were seated.

"Yes, and make everything except a fortin This is the general store of Louisville; it is the stage-office, and the post-office, and I'm the registrar."

"Oh, indeed!" said St Evelyn, pricking up his ears; "how long have you been that?"

"Five or six years, or more. Ain't worth much. Few deaths in this healthy place; births is scarcer, because there are no marriages, or precious few."

"There was a marriage registered here years ago on which a good deal turned. I suppose it was to you they came for copies of certificates in the Lezaire case."

"What! that big case tried in London, G. B.? Of course I remember that. I gave copies of all the certificates, and did quite a good trade at that time."

"I was concerned in that case," said the Colonel, frankly. "It affected me rather seriously."

"Did it now? Well, well! Was you ousted by the other chap? That was hard lines. But it was all plain sailing, wasn't it? The register was not to be gainsaid. Would you like to see it?"

"Yes, if you're so pressing, and it is not too

much trouble. The registers are in your custody, of course."

"Yes, sirree. They don't go out of my possession. I know the penalties. I've got them inside, in my back parlour, under lock and key. Step in, gentlemen."

The register was produced—an ancient volume, strongly bound and clamped, of the usual oblong shape—and they turned rapidly over its pages of printed forms filled in with varied handwritings, till they reached the two entries that had settled the succession to the Lezaire estates.

There, set down in regular form, was the record of the marriage at Louisville on the 23d of August, 185—, of Percy Lezaire and Priscilla Spary, in the presence of Abraham Comfort, registrar, and two other witnesses. The register was also duly signed by the parties to the marriage.

"That's good enough, ain't it?" said Mr Jerram. "I made six copies of that, with my own hand, and certified them, at a dollar and a half apiece. Best day's work I've had since

I was in Louisville. What are you looking at, stranger? D'ye think you can alter such facts as those?"

St Evelyn had been examining the register fixedly, but with no special intention. He stared at it abstractedly—he was musing in a vague, dreamy, disconnected way, rather foreign to his nature as a man of action, thinking of the strange events, sorrows, disappointments—crimes, perchance—that had followed from, or might be concealed beneath, this brief entry in clumsy characters and now fast-fading ink.

Mr Jerram repeated his question before St Evelyn recovered himself.

"I? Oh no, not in the least. Better and sharper men than me tried that. Of course the entry was tested, examined minutely? It might have been tampered with."

"Drop that, stranger. Who would you accuse? That book has been in honest hands for years—mine for the last five years—and no man should tempt me to do what was wrong. As for those that went before me——"

"No offence is meant, Mr Jerram," protested the Colonel—"certainly not against you; but now that I have raised this question, I shall not be satisfied till I have answered it for myself in my own way."

He took the book close up to the little window, through which a stream of strong white light, reflected from the snow outside, poured into the parlour, and scanned the record attentively for some minutes.

After that he held the page up to the window against the light.

Then he returned to the table, and seeing his companions watch him with surprise, said in explanation—

"I only wanted to be quite sure, and I am not quite satisfied, I confess. Have you a microscope in the house?" he asked of the registrar; "or a magnifying-glass of any kind?"

"That's about the only thing I don't keep or sell."

"I have a field-telescope with me," said Captain Sutton—"the one I use in deer-stalking."

"Fetch it, Gibbings; we'll unscrew the lenses," said the Colonel; "that'll answer my purpose."

He brought the strong magnifier thus obtained to bear upon the open register close under the light.

"Here, Mr Jerram, come and look for yourself," he went on, after a long pause, as he handed over the register and the glass. "What do you make of it?"

"Erasures—nary doubt of that. The paper has been scratched down, and there's fresh writing atop."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Gibbings.

"I could take my oath to the scratchings, and I reckon I'm right about the writing. They've used two kinds of ink, d'ye see?"

"How do you know that?" asked Captain Sutton in his turn, as he also examined the entries.

"Why, by the colour and the thickness. The top writing's not in the ink we registrars always use. Permanent ink ours is, warranted not to

wash out, and very black. The words over the scratchings are much paler, don't ye see?"

"You're right, Mr Jerram, and I compliment you on your acumen," remarked the Colonel. "It is impossible to overestimate the importance of this discovery, and for this reason, that the words which have been tampered with are the names, the Christian and surname, of one of the parties to the marriage. 'Percy' and 'Lezaire' have both been written in the new ink."

"But why?" asked Sutton.

"Presumably over other names. We have been told that Priscilla Spary married Philip Lehague; depend upon it, this is the record of that marriage, but the male name has been changed. And unless I am much mistaken, it is the same" —the Colonel turned over the pages of the register, and made another quick but searching examination,—"yes, it is the same in the birth certificate, the entry recording the birth of the offspring of this marriage."

"This is the rummest start!" said Mr Jer-

ram, presently. "It's quite clear there has been fraud, but there's no telling when or how."

"What ought to be done, Colonel?" asked Sutton. "Of course you will act on this extraordinary information."

"We must first of all ask our friend here to make quite sure of the register. It ought to be impounded by some responsible official."

"Can't you trust me, sir?" said Mr Jerram. "I'll take good care of it, and swear to produce it intact. You can seal it up if you like, and the place where I keep it."

"It's too precious, Mr Jerram, to be left in this God-forsaken spot, at the mercy of any ill-disposed people. I'd rather not let it out of my sight. I'd like to take it straight back to Sydney, and on by the first chance to Halifax."

"What's to harm it here? Who'll want to interfere with it? Why, think of all the years it's lain unnoticed in that cupboard."

The Colonel was thinking over the assault made upon Gibbings, and of the lengths to which these reckless Podifats would go in

their desperate desire to hold their own. But he only said—

"You get sealing-wax and your official seal, Mr Jerram, if you own such a thing. Make the register into a parcel, and hand it over. I promise you it shall be worth your while."

"I can't part with the book," protested the registrar.

"Then we'll take you with it," said the Colonel, with a pleasant laugh, which tempered his resolute tone. "You shan't be separated; only the register shall not remain here."

"Softly, gentlemen; no threats. I'm an official in the discharge of his duty—ready to give proper assistance to all who claim it—but I am also a trader and man of business, and in that aspect I expect to be paid for my time."

"You shall have all your expenses, never fear," said the Colonel, "and a handsome bonus, if all turns out as I expect. So make your arrangements, and we'll go back to Sydney this very day."

"If I must, I must; you're too many for

me," Mr Jerram admitted, with an air of resignation.

The truth was, he had no objection to visit the capital at other people's expense. Sydney was better than Louisville any day; politics were discussed there more frequently and with greater fervour.

So the registrar sealed up the register formally in the presence of all parties, and put it under his arm. His wife, who would act as his *locum tenens* in all his varied functions, was summoned from the kitchen, and desired to fetch his blue blanket-cloth overcoat, seamed with scarlet lines, his great fur gauntlets, and his snow-boots and fur cap; and thus fortified and prepared, Mr Jerram took his seat in the Colonel's sleigh.

CHAPTER LXVI.

THE FIRST SNOW.

LOUISVILLE had not seen so many visitors, nor had "Jerram's" been so much in request, for years. Scarcely had St Evelyn carried off the registrar than two other visitors, both wearing the hooded blanket-coat and high boots patronised by male settlers at that season of the year, asked for him at the office-shop, and learnt exactly why he had gone away.

There was no reticence about Mrs Jerram, a large loose-mouthed woman, who was as talkative as her husband when she found a willing listener, which Mr Jerram seldom was.

"Such a racket you never saw. It was here one minute and gone the next. I was in the

kitchen with a batch of new biscuits in the stove when he calls, and he says, 'I'm off to Sydney.' 'Why not to Charlestown?' says I, 'or Miramichi, a-wasting your dollars?' 'It's business,' says he. 'And who's to see after the business here?' says I. 'And it's all paid for by these gentlemen, and there will be more to come by-and-by.' And next minute he was gone—like a flash—in one of the other lot's sleighs."

"Didn't he tell you what took him so suddenly away?"

"Surely. It was all about that English case, the Lezaire case—you may have heard. They'd found a mistake in the registure—a 'rasure or something, and they were going to take the book into the Supreme Court."

"At Sydney?"

"Perhaps, or Halifax, or even London, G. B. Anyway, they've gone. They're to stay this first night at the mines, so Jerram said. The gentleman as stands treat was to give him a shake-down, and they'd all go on to Sydney to-morrow."

"Come along, Jacob," whispered one newcomer to the other—the reader will have guessed who they were. "We must get back as slippy as we can. We'll call round again," she went on to Mrs Jerram, "when the registrar comes back."

"Won't you leave any message? My master's bound to be home soon."

"It'll keep, ma'am. Shove ahead, Jacob; get the pony harnessed up. It's a long road back, and we shall have more snow before long."

The conveyance which had brought this precious pair to Louisville was a common country sleigh—a couple of planks laid on a framework, with runners. An empty box lashed between two upright sticks served for a seat, and a coarse, much-worn buffalo-skin was the only protection against the weather. The horses were a hardy pair of native ponies, shaggy and unkempt, but capable of doing long distances at their own pace. They had travelled already that day from the Nom de Dieu

mines to Louisville, quite twenty-five miles, and they were about to do the journey again.

"What's your game now, Priss?" asked Podifat, gruffly. "I ain't had a bite or sup since morning, and the ponies ain't fit to travel."

"They've got to take us back to the mines, if they drop at the end of it. It's our last chance. I'm going to have that register, by hook or crook."

"What will you do with it?"

"Burn it, bury it in a snowdrift, or chuck it into the sea. Without it they can do nothing against Hubie, even if they lay hands on me. So shove 'em along, and we'll make the mines before nightfall. We'll lay by in the same place till we have made fresh plans."

Their halting-place was a wayside drinking-place, shanty-built, half a mile from the mines. They had visited it more than once already, coming out from Sydney on pretended business at the mines, and now used it again to stable their team.

"You are late on the road," said the woman who kept the place. "Are you going Sydney way?"

"Yes, missus; but the ponies want rest, and we thought to give 'em a feed here while we see a friend."

"You'll be wise to stop overnight, all of you. It's coming on coarse, and there's lots of snow to fall."

"I reckon you're right," replied Mrs Leleu. "Anyway, we'll see. Can you give us a bite? Some fried pork or salt mackerel—anything, while the horses are eating their feed. Yes? Get it ready then; we'll step over to the mines."

Mrs Leleu wished to reconnoitre the St Evelyns' house. She knew its exact position, but that was not enough. She must, if possible, ascertain who were its inmates, and what they were about that night.

A toilsome walk through the fresh-fallen snow brought them to the edge of the clearing, from which they crept along the far side of the

snake-fence quite close to the house. It was lit up, and lively with the sounds of voices and the jingling of bells. The sleighs still stood at the door, the horses still unharnessed, and St Evelyn was plainly heard expostulating with Mr Jerram.

"You don't go on another yard to-night, I tell you. You must take us as you find us, but we will do our best to make you comfortable. It's too late to see any one in Sydney, and the horses are dead tired."

"I wouldn't make so bold, Colonel; I'd loathe to put you and madam out; but it ain't a cheerful night to go further, and that's a fact."

"That'll do for the present," said Mrs Leleu. "He's camping here to-night. I'll know about the inside of that house before morning, you'll see."

The Colonel's ways were hospitable, and he had long been debarred from entertaining friends. Rachel, brought up in the liberal ideas of English country-house life, was delight-

ed to receive her guests, and the present was an especially joyous occasion. She had looked for some days of comparative loneliness, with the society only of Mrs Sutton, and now suddenly her husband and his companions had returned, bringing Mr Jerram along with him and his extraordinary news. Nothing in the house was too good for its guests. There was no stint; the store cupboards were ransacked, the great Canadian stove in the kitchen was laden with pots and pans, and quite a feast was prepared.

The festivities within — the warmth, the bright lights, the abundant fare, and the cheery talk—were in strong contrast with the dreariness of the scene outside. The snowstorm had increased in severity as the night drew on. It was one of those dense incessant falls seen only in these latitudes, which soon hide the tracks and lay the landscape knee-deep in snow.

"It's going to be a snorter," said old Jerram, looking out. "The first big fall is always so.

We'll want the snow-plough to get on to Sydney to-morrow."

"And the snow-shoes. You shall try them, Mrs Sutton," said the Colonel.

"Soft falling, Etta," added her husband; "and you're bound to fall at first with soles of catgut a yard long."

"How thankful I am you are safe back at home!" was all Mrs St Evelyn could say. "If even you had been delayed on the road——"

"'Tain't easy travelling anyhow in such a storm as this. A roof's a roof, and snow's better atop than below."

"And to think that there may be poor people on the road to-night," said tender-hearted Rachel. "Why, they might be lost, hopelessly buried alive."

"What was that?" cried Mrs Sutton quickly, her hearing quickened perhaps by Mrs St Evelyn's remark. "Surely I heard a voice—some one shouting."

"Impossible!" said the Colonel. "And at this time of night. Here, Gibbings," he called

to the kitchen, "step outside and see what you make of it."

There was a whisk of wind, bringing in a cloud of snow, as Gibbings opened the outer door and stood with his hand curved round one ear.

"Not a doubt of it, sir," he sang out towards the parlour. "There's some one shouting down by the snake-fence, but I can see nothing in this driving snow."

A sufficient summons this to bring every one out; and all the men, snatching up fur caps and overcoats, went plunging out into the deep snow that blocked up the pathway from the house.

It was not a dozen yards to the snake-fence, the limit of the property, and just the other side was the track into the mining village. There were sounds as of people there, and horses. Voices were muttering indistinguishable words, and there was now and again the jingle of a cracked sleigh-bell.

"Who are you? What brings you here on such a night?" shouted the Colonel.

"Whose diggins are these anyhow?" was the answer. "Are ye gwine to lend a hand? Guess we're adrift somehow."

"Come on, man; the gate's this way. Lead your horses; it's all good going under the new snow."

Under the efforts and encouragement of the whole party the two horses in the sleigh were coaxed as far as the front door of the house, where the light streamed out upon the newcomer. He was white from head to foot, but his face under the deep hood of his blanket-coat was that of a full-blooded black man, and he talked with a negro accent.

"Where do you come from?" repeated the Colonel.

"Tarnton, good lor!" answered the man, rolling his white eyeballs, and showing his glistening teeth.

"And where do you want to go?" added Mr Jerram.

"Sydney, God bless you! Can't be much furder away."

"You'll never get on there to-night," said the

Colonel, "or until the storm abates. I'll give you shelter here. No one would turn a dog away from his door on such a night as this."

"Will yer, though? Say, Cissy, old gal, wake up and hear what the gentleman says. My old gal's on the sleigh there, most froze alive," he went on, turning to the Colonel.

"A woman! Bring her in, man! It's rank wickedness to leave her out in the cold."

She was a curious-looking creature, this Cissy, and but for the petticoat-skirt might have been taken for a man. She had a man's blanket-coat on, with the high hood pulled well forward, and the opening was narrowed by a handkerchief tied high up over the face; but inside, at the far end of this quaint head-dress—something like a poke-bonnet—was a face as dark as her companion's, and a pair of gleaming eyes.

"Here, Rachel, Mrs Sutton, some of you! come and look after this poor thing. Get her in by the kitchen-fire."

The womenkind quickly gathered round the belated black woman, and carried her close to the great stove, where the snow that encrusted

her apparel quickly melted and made two great pools on the floor.

"Better get her things off and put her in a warm bed," suggested Rachel, full of kindly consideration.

"No, no, missie; me do berry well so. Don't you make no fuss about me—I'm only mean trash; I'll get 'long fine here by the fire. Biemby me lie down dere, anywhere—so," and suiting the action to her speech, Cissy huddled herself into a heap in a corner, and left her helpmate to shift for himself.

That was soon settled. Peter Lycurgus, as he called himself, refused to make free with a white gentleman's house, and leaving his "old gal to fraw," led his horses across to a shed in the yard, and expressed his intention of sharing their stable.

When bedtime came, an hour or two later, the irruption of these two strange visitors and the cordial welcome accorded them was almost forgotten.

CHAPTER LXVII.

FIRE!

The St Evelyns' house was not sufficiently roomy to accommodate a crowd of visitors easily, but its masters did their best for their guests. The Suttons had a room to themselves, the spare room, the same which they had occupied since their arrival; and this with the St Evelyns', a third room appropriated as nursery, and a small den under the rafters for the Irish "help," made up the sleeping accommodation of the house.

It was settled that Mr Jerram and Gibbings should make it out in the dining-room, which they could leave betimes and before it was required for breakfast. There remained only

the old negro woman, who still lay snoring upon the kitchen-floor, and who sulkily resisted all attempts to arouse her.

"I wanted her to share Bridget's bed up-stairs," said Mrs St Evelyn. "But Frau Siebel is staying here to-night."

"She'll do where she is well enough. Throw one of those old robes over her," said the Colonel, and they left her as she lay.

"Good night, Mr Jerram," said the Colonel, as he passed the dining-room door, immediately adjoining the kitchen. "You had better let me lock up the register."

"No, sirree; I don't let that book out of my possession until I hand it over to some officer of the law."

"Take care Gibbings don't steal it from under your pillow," cried the Colonel, laughing, as he went up-stairs. "Good night! Good night!"

He was the last on the move, as he thought; but if he had returned to the kitchen he would have found Cissy no longer a huddled-up shapeless mass of wet clothes, but an upright figure

which had crept stealthily to the door, and stood there alert and eager to hear what passed.

"I was wellnigh smothered," she said, drawing back her hood and unbuttoning her heavy coat. "I thought they'd sit all night. And now they have gone to rest, how much nearer am I to what brought me here right into the lion's den? What can I do amongst such a mob of them? Four men, and three of them hate me like hell. That blackguard Gibbings, too, he's like a cat, with nine lives. But I'll fix him next time, never fear."

"How am I to get it?" she went on musing, as she crept stealthily about the kitchen in the red flickering light of the blazing stove, the door of which she had opened, peering into corners and exploring every inch. An hour or more passed thus between cat-like creeping about the floor and fits of motionless abstraction, as she sat gazing into the glowing fire.

"If I could only steal it in the night—they are bound to sleep hard, those two—steal it and

make off at daylight. Jacob swears he could find his way, storm or no storm. I wonder if it's snowing still?"

She opened the shutters gently, and looked out on the night.

It might have been a preconcerted signal, for almost immediately some one approached the window outside.

Cissy, or more exactly Mrs Leleu, started back, effacing herself, evidently uncertain what to expect.

But a gentle tap with the finger-nail upon the window reassured her. She lifted the sash an inch or two, while the person outside swept away the deep snow from the window-sill.

"What cheer, Priss?—how goes it?" The query was whispered so low that she barely caught the words.

"What of the night? Is it still snowing? Could you find your way out of this at day-break?"

"Ay, before that. I can see in the dark—but it won't be that; the sky is clearing, and

we shall have the northern lights to show us the road."

"There'll be more light than that, Jacob, you'll see: a big blazing torch. Just wait. But listen now. Get back to the shed, harness the horses, cut loose the bells—mind that; and have everything ready to hurry off the moment I come out—any time this next hour or two. You be on the watch, and next time I open the shutter put the horses to. But don't stop talking here now, we might be heard."

She shut down the window as gently as she had opened it, and resumed her place by the stove.

"They might catch me in their room: they sleep light for all I know. It isn't safe to try that. The other plan's better and bigger, and it will rid us of them all. So easy, too: everything ready to one's hand. But I must get to work: there is plenty to do, and the time is creeping on."

She threw off her overcoat, which would have impeded her movements, and passed out from

the kitchen into a little lean-to or scullery beyond, where there was a store of chopped wood and short logs for the kitchen-stove. She carried this, armful after armful, into the main kitchen, and stacked it round the stove. Then she went to the kitchen-cupboard, and brought out a large stone jar she had discovered previously. It was without label, but the contents betrayed themselves at once by the smell. There is no mistaking petroleum or paraffin.

Uncorking the jar, she filled a tin pannikin with the fluid, which she poured over the fagots and brushwood, repeating the process until the jar was empty, and the firewood was as inflammable as tinder.

"The train's laid," she said, exultingly. "I've only to apply the match, and they will all be burnt alive in their beds. It will blaze up like a furnace, too, and I must get what I want right off, or I may be singed in the very act."

She looked round when the work was completed, and opened the shutter and then the window to increase the draught. Another mo-

ment was spent in putting on her blanket overcoat and readjusting her hood.

All now was ready.

"Here goes!" she muttered between her set teeth, as with the iron rake she dragged out a lot of burning embers from the stove right into the thick of the fagots, and then ran for her life to the door.

The whole kitchen was filled instantaneously with flame; great tongues of fire, strong and fierce, leapt up from the floor, and lapped the place in sudden insatiable conflagration.

For one instant this devilish woman paused on the threshold to look back upon her handiwork. Satisfied with its completeness, she suddenly rent the silence of the night with vigorous yells of "Fire! Fire! Fire!" then made straight for the dining-room, which was at her hand.

Its occupants were the first roused by her note of alarm. Gibbings and Mr Jerram rushed out into the passage, shouting, "Where? Where?" But the question was answered by

the lurid light that blazed out from the burning kitchen. The flames lit up the dining-room too, illumining every part; and Mrs Leleu took in at one glance the two mattresses on the floor, and the tumbled heaps of rugs and robes that showed where the men had been sleeping.

With one bound she was in the room and out again. A few seconds of frenzied search revealed the presence of the bulky volume, to obtain which this female had not hesitated to sacrifice a whole houseful—tender infants, helpless women, strong men, and all. She hastily hid the precious register beneath her coat, unfastened the front door, and escaped out into the snow.

By this time the whole place was on the move. Terror and consternation had possession of the household; affrighted women mingled their shrieks with the male shouts of warning and dismay. Suddenly, above the tumult, St Evelyn's sonorous voice rang out in notes of sternest command.

"Silence, every one, and listen!"

He was cool, masterful, self-possessed, like a soldier on parade.

"Sutton," he said sharply, "you see to the women and children: get them out of the house. Rachel, my dear, take your orders from him; wrap up warm and quick. Go on. Ah, yes! and send on to the village for help—one of the servants, they know the road best."

"They'll sink in the new snow. I'll go with the snow-shoes — they're hanging up in the hall." The suggestion was from Mr Jerram.

"Good! be off with you! Now, Gibbings, you and I must tackle the fire. Where is it? What can we do?"

"In the kitchen, sir. Very little, sir." The man answered his master's questions promptly in succession. "The water's froze hard everywhere."

"Let's try snow; it may smother the fire. And we may isolate it; the kitchen is built out, you know. Out with you! Force open the window, while I bring shovels."

Gibbings, in spite of his excitement, noticed at once that the window was open, and wondered. By-and-by he remembered the fact, and understood it.

Two men shovelling snow through a window upon a raging fire were not likely to make much more impression on it than Mrs Partington on the sea when she tried to keep it out with her mop.

St Evelyn and Gibbings worked hard; Sutton soon joined them. But the flames gained ground steadily, and it seemed certain that the old frame-house was doomed.

"It will catch the dining-room soon," said the Colonel. "We shall not save a thing."

"The register—did any one think of that?" asked Sutton.

"Not I, nor Mr Jerram. But I'll go back; there may be time."

He ran into the house, deaf to the Colonel's expostulations, and was so long away that they feared he had been engulfed in the fire.

"It's gone, sir! I looked high and low till I

dared stay no longer. The wall was cracking. Save us! what's that?"

At this moment the roof of the kitchen, a single-storeyed shed or outhouse, fell in with a tremendous crash. The uprights must have been burnt clean through, and down came the whole superstructure, letting several tons of newly fallen snow in at once upon the fire. The dead weight choked it, with a tremendous hissing and spluttering, while dense volumes of smoke rose from the ruins.

"Now lads, shovel away!" cried the Colonel, grasping the situation, and working with wild energy to pile on more snow. "Keep it under. It's mastered, I do believe."

There was not a doubt of it. The snow falling from the roof had suddenly and completely extinguished the fire.

St Evelyn satisfied himself of this, and then hurried off to tell the joyful news to his wife. They were cowering together, all the women, in a corner of the warm stable, shivering, but more from terror than cold.

Confidence was soon restored, more and more wraps were brought from the house—for St Evelyn insisted that until daylight came and the amount of damage was known, no one but the men should re-enter it.

"The kitchen is quite destroyed, then?" said Mrs St Evelyn. "But that poor negro woman—has any one seen her? Surely she got out in time, or can she have perished? How truly horrible! Oh, do go and see!"

"No one thought of her, I'm afraid. She made no sign, you know. Nor the man. Where is he, by the way? He never offered his help. Can he have slept through it all?"

They made search in the stable, but came upon no signs of him. What was more strange, his horses and sleigh had all disappeared too.

"I don't understand—except that they were curs and ran the moment the fire showed."

"That's about it, Colonel." The speaker was Mr Jerram. "But they did not run far. I came upon their sleigh just at the entrance of the village. They were in difficulties with a

drift, and had overturned. Some of the boys had turned out to lend 'em a hand when I came up with the news of the fire. I twigged our friends at once, and thinking it odd they should have slipped away so quickly, had them detained. It was just as well. What d'ye think one of the boys found in the snow? Look ye hyar!"

It was the register, which had dropped from inside Mrs Leleu's coat when the sleigh had upset.

"I begin to smell a rat," said the Colonel. "Where are these two black folk?"

"Black, Colonel? They're only nigger minstrels. Why, the snow had washed it most off. We twigged with a lantern-light——"

"They must be taken care of, these two—kept close prisoners. I don't doubt now that the house was purposely set on fire."

The rest is soon told.

When daylight came, Colonel St Evelyn with Gibbings went into the village, where the latter at once identified the pretended negroes as

Podifat and Mrs Leleu. They were now under the escort of a handful of stalwart miners, in whose charge they were removed to Sydney the same day, and thence by steamer to Halifax.

Several serious charges hung over them—theft, incendiarism, attempted murder—and they were at once committed to the city jail to take their trial at the next Colonial Criminal Assize.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

JUSTICE AT LAST.

The case against Sir Hubert Lezaire was by this time conclusive and complete. The whole guilty conspiracy was unmasked; the whole plot, so astutely contrived and so recklessly carried out, was exposed to the full light of day.

Much new evidence was soon forthcoming. As the strange story circulated through the colony — and the crimes attempted at Cape Breton gave it a publicity the Lezaire succession had never obtained—many people came forward to establish Mrs Leleu's identity with Priscilla Podifat, the sister of the man Jacob, who was her associate, confederate, and tool. It

was proved, too, that the woman Podifat had once been in service at Louisville with the former registrar. Yet more,—that she had had a child—a son—by some Englishman—a swell, people said—who had visited the colony five or six and twenty years before; and this information further investigated, brought out the surprising fact that the stranger was no other than Sir Percy Lezaire.

All this Colonel St Evelyn, as he obtained the news, transmitted home. The discovery in the register was also sworn to by affidavits, and the book itself surrendered for safe-keeping to officials of the supreme court. There was more than enough now to justify a fresh suit of ejectment, and oust the so-called Sir Hubert Lezaire.

The business was intrusted to Mr Tinson. The St Evelyns themselves wisely resolved to remain in the colony until the case was finally decided at home. Besides, the Colonel was bound to appear against the Podifats, and the trial was not to come on till after Christmas. The interval he spent at the mines, still scrupu-

lously attentive to the interests of his kind employer, who had helped him in the hour of direst need.

When the Podifats were arraigned a fresh detainer was lodged against the woman; and at the termination of the trial for attempted murder and arson, which entailed a sentence of ten years' penal servitude on both brother and sister, Priscilla was surrendered by the colonial tipstaff to two emissaries of the Thorpeshire police.

They held a warrant and a judge's order to bring her home to England for trial as the murderess of Sir Carysfort Lezaire.

The young interloper did not wait to be ejected. While his nearest relations, one of whom had risked everything for him, were playing the last cards in their desperate game, he was in trouble on his own account.

Old Fieldus had proved implacable. When he discovered the wrong that his daughter had suffered at the hands of the seductive but unprincipled Hubert, he had sworn to have revenge.

The case he had commenced for breach of promise was expanded into a charge of felonious abduction. It was easy enough to make out that Rebecca Fieldus was a presumptive heiress, and to bring young Podifat—that was the name and description under which he was indicted—within the act.

Hubert fled, but was promptly pursued and captured. The case was tried at the Central Criminal Court, and ended in a short sentence of imprisonment, which had not expired when Mrs Leleu, as we may still call her, was brought back to England.

They now associated Hubert with her in the indictment for murder, and when the craven hound learned that he was to be put on his trial on a capital charge, he voluntarily offered to make a clean breast of it and tell all he knew.

He was allowed to turn Queen's evidence, and his testimony—against his mother, whose crimes had been committed solely for him—sufficed to convict her of the murder of the last baronet.

Hubert's story was circumstantial, and the jury believed it. Let me give it in his own words, as he told it in court:—

"I never knew she was my mother—not till long after I got the property. How should I? She never treated me as a son, but was always on to me, bullying and bullyragging me, and saying I was good for nought.

"It was after I went back to live at the Hall that I first began to understand. She tried her old games, and I could not put up with her. I ordered her out of the place, and she answered back that I was only there at her pleasure—that she had got me in, and that she could put me out, and a lot more like that.

"I didn't believe a word till she showed me what she had written. She could write anything, in anybody's hand, and she had forged Sir Percy's, because, she said, I was his son, and ought to be the heir.

"I hid the coat—the Colonel's coat—for her. It was in her room till she went away, but she didn't choose to take it with her, and

left me to find a place for it. I remembered the old North Lodge, and as it stood empty, I went there one night and put it in an old box there.

"Is there anything more you'd like to know, gentlemen?"

He spoke timorously, shamefacedly, like the coward that he was, and as usual with downcast eyes; but he had all the more reason, for opposite him in the dock the prisoner who had imperilled herself to serve him was glaring at him with wild rage at his base ingratitude.

He was questioned about the poison, its purchase, its administration. On neither point could he speak precisely, although he well remembered Mrs Leleu's presence in the sick-room and by the bedside.

"Once or twice I wondered what she was at, but I never rightly made out. Only I guessed in the end. I knew then what she had done."

The summing up and verdict were a foregone conclusion. There was no doubt of the miser-

able woman's guilt. Priscilla Podifat, *alias* Carlotta Leleu, was found guilty and sentenced to death.

No mercy was shown her—no commutation of the punishment. Poisoners never escape the extreme rigour of the law; and the wily deep-scheming fiend who had done one innocent young life to death and nearly wrecked others, suffered on the scaffold of Market Reepham jail.

. . . . . .

A word or two more, dismissing the rest of the personages in this veracious history. To all, time brought its revenges: some encountered woes and worries not altogether undeserved; others, those especially whom the reader ought to be interested in as having endured great wrong and grievous hardship, found compensation in after-life.

The waters of impecuniosity closed over General Wyndham-Parker's head. The money-lender, Issachar, sued him on the bill he had

signed for £10,000, and drove him into the bankruptcy court. He emerged with only a fraction of his former income left, which he eked out hereafter in a small Italian town. Neither he nor his wife could forgive Mrs Sutton; and they kept so close a watch on the other girls, that no more elopements and no more marriages took place in the family. They had enough of Hubert Podifat, and his name has never since been mentioned among them.

Young Podifat—the name to which he of course reverted — disappeared entirely from Thorpeshire. Through the kindness of the St Evelyns, he was helped out of the country to the Canadian far west, and he receives a small allowance so long as he remains away.

There was great rejoicing at Straddlethorpe when the rightful owners came back to their own. Lady Lezaire, backed up by Mr Tinson, was at the Hall to greet them, and welcomed St Evelyn as cordially now as she had detested him when he first arrived. The county, too, turned out in a body to make amends for the

evil it had wrought, and the Colonel was raised at once to a pinnacle of popularity.

Gibbings came with his master to take up his permanent residence at the Hall. He is quite one of the family—no longer a servant, but a valued and trusted friend.

Another stanch friend in time of trial, Mr Carrington Lomas, is one of the most welcome of the numerous guests invited to Straddlethorpe.

THE END

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